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# Writers' FORUM



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## A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Lots of beginnings for our first issue of the academic year. Douglas McPherson sets out how to start making contact in the publishing world, pointing out that, although it's suited to self-motivated people, writing does have a place for everyone if you take the right approach. Then in his Inside Story column, Douglas explains why he ended up writing the beginning of a romance novel last – because it was easier to get it right once he knew what the book was about.

Lorraine Mace is also looking at openings in this month's story workshop – or rather why writers are usually better off not bothering about a 'beginning' at all and just getting straight into the action. It's a technique I have often used as an editor, cutting the opening few paragraphs from a story. The writer is often keen to explain the time, place or characters but such introductions add little that can't be woven in more subtly or more quickly later. Talking of which, that's enough from me – get on with the magazine.

Write soon, Carl

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# newsFRONT

The latest in the world of books, the internet and publishing – written by you

## Worth versus price

● An author has launched a campaign to encourage people to think about the true value of books rather than their price. Historian Mathew Lyons is asking readers to write a short blurb or film themselves talking about a book that means a lot to them and share those thoughts on Twitter on 28 September, using the hashtag #WhatsABookWorth, along with the title and cover price.

'A good book represents absurdly good value for money, perhaps unique in the marketplace,' Lyons told *The Bookseller*. 'If you buy someone a book as a present, you can spend nearly as much on wrapping paper and a card.'

'But books aren't casual purchases for most people. We all have books that mean a great deal to us, books that have changed our lives. So why don't we talk about that fact more? Why not celebrate the extraordinary value they bring to our lives?'

Lyons said he would like

## Authors boost refugee appeal

● Award-winning author Patrick Ness (*The Knife of Never Letting Go*) has helped raise over £600,000 in just four days for Save the Children's Syria refugee appeal. Fed up of the 'inhumane feebleness' of the government, he promised to match-fund donations up to £10,000, a target met in just two hours. Then fellow authors joined in to encourage donations to reach higher milestones, with £10,000 gifts coming from Derek Landy, Jojo Moyes, Jill Mansell, Cressida Cowell, Anthony Horowitz, Suzanne Collins, David Nicholls and many more. Philip Pullman promised to give £10,000 when £435,000 was passed, which prompted Ness to tweet: 'C'mon, give him a reason to get *Book Four* out!' Pullman is working on *The Book of Dust*, the follow-up to his *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Publishers have been donating money and raffle prizes and Ness gave an extra £5000 after 5000 donations were reached. You can give at <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/PatrickNess>



Families are fleeing four years of terror in Syria

publishers and booksellers to talk more about the emotional worth of books rather than how cheap they are, and hoped the campaign would expand in the future.

'It would be wonderful to have schools involved, as well as bookshops, book clubs, publishers,' he said. 'There are so many of us for whom books are an integral part of our emotional

lives. That really ought to be something to celebrate.'

## Improper suggestion

● A Sunday panel session at the York Festival of Writing produced some controversy when Ben Copeland, agent at Rogers, Coleridge & White, declared that 'all proper writers have an agent'. Cue gasps of surprise and some booing from the audience.

When asked to define a proper writer, he revised his statement, saying that of the top 500 selling writers, over 90 per cent have an agent. He then spent the rest of the session asking if he was forgiven, which didn't happen, due to a good proportion of 'improper' writers in the audience!

Julie Cordiner

## Library link-up

● The Welsh government has announced plans to launch an

all-Wales library card that would allow users to access all library services across Wales, with the move saving local authorities up to 70 per cent on spending.

It would mean that users could borrow and return books in any library across the country. This would open up access for people to use free library computers wherever they are and would allow free seamless downloads of ebooks and e-zines. Currently, library users can only use library cards within the local authorities they are registered with.

## Kindle community

● Book recommendation site Goodreads, which has 40 million members worldwide, is being integrated into Amazon's Kindle and Fire tablet devices in the UK.

Amazon bought the online community portal for a reported \$150 million in 2013, and since then US readers have been able to discuss and recommend books directly on their devices. The

## Get paid online

● The Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society is encouraging its members to sign up to its website to help it save on postage. The ALCS is responsible for collecting licensing and copyright fees and distributing these between writers who have registered for membership. By the end of 2016 they expect all members to access their financial statements directly from the members' area at [www.alcs.co.uk](http://www.alcs.co.uk). The savings from no longer producing and posting paper statements will enable more funds to be distributed. Statements detailing the second payments for 2015 were due to be sent out to members around 25 September, at about the same time as monies will be credited to members' bank accounts. Go to [www.alcs.co.uk/signup](http://www.alcs.co.uk/signup) to register.

Beatrice Charles



device software is being updated this month.

Writers can create their own author page for free on Goodreads and interact with potential readers by sharing excerpts, reviewing other titles, or promoting new books and events.

## Spook-y revelation

Frederick Forsyth has disclosed that for almost 20 years he worked as an agent for MI6. Forsyth, the bestselling author of *The Day of the Jackal* and *The Odessa File*, reveals details of his life as a British agent in his new autobiography *The Outsider*.

The 77 year old was an RAF pilot and then a journalist. He has previously denied that he worked for the British Secret Service but has said that after nearly 60 years there is no longer any harm in making known his past as a spy.

As well as submitting reports to MI6 from Biafra, South Africa and Rhodesia, Forsyth also travelled through Checkpoint Charlie to East Germany in the early 1970s to collect an item from a fellow spy in the Soviet eastern block.

Many of his novels are set during the Cold War period. There can be little doubt that

## Dylan Thomas replica shed finishes tour

A replica of Dylan Thomas's writing shed has completed an 18-month tour of schools across England and Wales to celebrate a hundred years since the birth of Thomas in 1914.

The shed, the original of which can found at Thomas's former home, The Boathouse, in Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, will spend the autumn term at a college in Llanelli as an inspiration to students. It will then find a permanent home at the free St Fagan's Open Air Museum in Cardiff where other classic buildings are preserved to show the cultural and architectural history of Wales.

Sue Moules



his relationship with the secret services enabled him to write authentically of events during that time.

Beatrice Charles

## Playing the race card

Respected US anthology *Best American Poetry*, which has been published annually for 27 years, has been embroiled in controversy after it accepted a poem by a white man who used a Chinese pen name. The editors admit they were annoyed when the poet revealed the deception, which they branded a 'colonial theft', but said they had to

include the poem on its merits.

Michael Derrick Hudson, from Indiana, said the poem, *The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve*, was rejected under his real name 40 times before he sent it out as Yi-Fen Chou – and it was still rejected nine times before getting accepted. In the back of the anthology he writes: 'If indeed this is one of the best American poems of 2015, it took quite a bit of effort to get it into print, but I'm nothing if not persistent.'

The anthology's guest editor, Sherman Alexie, a native American writer, admitted that he had been 'more amenable' to the poem because he thought the

author was Chinese American, arguing that there are 'many examples of white nepotism inside the literary community'.

The editors have been criticised by some for taking race into account when judging and by others for not disqualifying Hudson from publication.

## Travel comp open

Dip your toes into the crowded waters of travel writing with this inviting competition. It's run by website [seniortravelexpert.com](http://seniortravelexpert.com) but you don't need to be a pensioner to have a go, just over 16 years old.

It's open to all comers – established or aspiring writers. Entry is free, and offers a first prize of £100. Your original, interesting piece has to relate to the theme 'Travel and Water', and must be no more than 750 words in length. It can be factual or fictional but above all must grab the attention and appeal to the editorial staff. Make them want to go there, be it lakes, oceans, rivers or a coastal touring holiday.

The closing date for entries is 31 December 2015. For full information, see [seniortravelexpert.com/travel-water-writing-competition](http://seniortravelexpert.com/travel-water-writing-competition)

Helen Griffiths

ODD SPOT BY HUGH SCOTT



After testing a vampire's ability to climb down a wall headfirst, Derek came to a not unsurprising conclusion.

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We want short news items for these pages, either researched directly by you or sourced from press releases, publications and rewritten for us. You'll get a byline and the best item each month wins a free subscription. This month's winner is Julie Cordiner.

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Please send items to [news@writers-forum.com](mailto:news@writers-forum.com). You can cover any topic that will be **useful, interesting or amusing** to writers. The subject should be big enough to appeal to a national/global readership although local news might still inspire or entertain writers in other regions. Get writing and good luck!





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# THE AWAKENING

After 20 years of trying, horror writer  
Tarn Richardson tells Douglas McPherson  
how he finally found his voice

The most commercial ideas can often be summed up in a single line – the ‘elevator pitch’. In the case of Tarn Richardson’s debut thriller, *The Damned*, the line came from his seven-year-old son, Will.

‘I was reading a great kids’ book to him,’ Tarn explains, ‘and he suddenly said, “Actually, I’m a bit bored with this.” I said, “Well, what would you write a book about?” and he said, “World War One and werewolves” – and from that point I was off and running. I went straight to my office and wrote the first draft in about four months.’

*The Damned* is published by Duckworth Overlook, a venerable independent publisher founded by Virginia Woolf’s half-brother in the 19th century, which has more recently had enormous success with Max Brooks’ multimillion-selling zombie story *World War Z*. So could werewolves be the new zombies? Or the new vampires for that matter?

‘I hope so,’ says Richardson. ‘I think the poor old werewolves have been overlooked. When I was a kid, I had a little handbook about ghosties and ghoulies called the *Beaver Book of Horror*. It had a big section on werewolves that I read over and over again. I have no idea what it was about them that I liked so much, but they just really appealed.’

From the perspective of adulthood, the author reflects: ‘I suppose it’s the desperation of these cursed beings. They’re under the control of others and desperately trying to escape their pain. They’re also the perfect fit for WW1 – the analogy of men becoming monsters.’

Despite its inspiration, *The Damned* is not a children’s book. Following the adventures of the brutal, hard-drinking Poldek Tacit, an heretic-hunting member of the Catholic Inquisition, the story is set amid the trenches and barbed wire of a conflict that had one boot in modern warfare and the other in medieval combat.

‘I never knew until I started doing my research that a lot of the early fighting was hand-to-hand, with maces, rocks, bits of wood and whatever you could get your hands on. It was a visceral, physical clubbing each other to death,’ says Tarn.

‘Then there were the technological advances in that war, in order to be able to kill more and more people. Pat Mills, who created *2000AD*, described WW1 as the first science-fiction war and I think he was absolutely right. You had people going into battle in armoured suits... horses in gas masks. The fantastical elements in the

Continued overleaf ►

Continued from previous page

book fit very easily into that.'

Richardson currently has his fangs in the writing of the second instalment of the Tacit trilogy. In fact, it's what Douglas Adams might have described as a four-book trilogy. He's already penned a 10,000-word prequel, *The Hunted*, which he describes as 'a short, sharp kick in the guts of a book', and which is available as a free ebook to promote the series.

The author admits he's still pinching himself at the push his publisher is giving his work. 'It's in their Super Six, and I'm like, "Really...???" I hope it does well, as much for them as for me, because they've pulled out all the stops.'

At 43, Richardson is no overnight success. He's dreamed of being a writer since he was eight years old, when a teacher read *The Hobbit* to his class. So what has he been doing in the meantime?

'To be honest,' he chuckles, 'I was writing rubbish!'

He says: 'As a schoolboy I'd write reams and reams of pages. It was completely directionless, led nowhere and was never finished. I'd hand in 30 pages to the teacher and they'd say, "Utter rubbish, Richardson! You need to focus. You need to have a start and an end, and get there."'

It was a lesson that took him the next 20 years to learn. But the words never stopped flowing.

'When I was 16, I started playing Dungeons and Dragons and I used to write everything for the adventures, which we would play for weeks and weeks. Looking back, that was a fantastic thing to do, because although I wasn't writing stories or novels, I was growing my imagination and seeing where it would take me.'

More scripts for games followed when Tarn reached university.

'Murder mystery games that you play over dinner started to get popular. I played a few and thought: "I could do better than this." I wrote a few for my university friends and then I sent them to the Whodunnit Murder Mystery Company in Exeter and they loved them. They paid a pittance, but it was great to have finally written something and had it accepted.'

Around the same time, Tarn sat down to write his first novel. 'I decided it was going to be an absolute epic, and spent more time writing than I did on the art course I was on. I was much happier typing away at this directionless, pointless novel.'

The book never came to anything, and neither did the others he slaved over for the next two decades, scribbling in the moonlight while building a web design

business by day. 'I sent the odd thing off and got the usual rejections, but I never felt defeated, simply because I loved writing.'

Looking back on his unpublished work, Richardson says: 'It was all very *Lord of the Rings*. I've always been a massive Tolkein fan and I've spent the last 20 years trying not to be Tolkein, because I don't think anyone can be. It's been a long struggle to pull myself away from that and I think what 20 years of writing inane rubbish did was help me find my own voice.'

He adds: 'The problem was there was never one thing that really caught my imagination, that inspired me to write something unique and different.'

The turning point was a trip to France, with his father and brother-in-law, to visit the fields where two great-uncles had fought in the Great War.

'I realised, goodness me, I've got to write something about this. This is something I can get my teeth into.'

The would-be author wasn't home and dry yet, though.

His initial effort, he admits, was: 'Absolutely ghastly! I'm a big fan of *Game of Thrones* and *Band of Brothers*, the WW2 epic, and I thought, I'm going to write a five-volume sprawling epic about WW1 with some fantastical element behind it – but what that element was, I wasn't sure.'

'I wrote 10 or 20 chapters, sent it to the literary agency LAW, and for the first time, rather than just a short sweet rejection, Ben Clark wrote a whole page of A4, saying, "You've got something here, however..." And it was quite a big "however".'

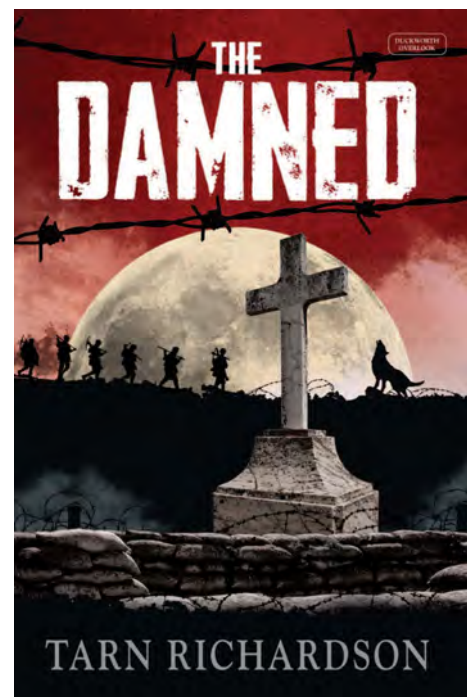
'The problem was it was still trying to be too grand, and it wasn't focused enough. It needed something to hang itself on.'

The hook came along the very evening that Richardson got Clark's letter, when he sat down to read his son a bedtime story. Will's werewolf suggestion was 'perfect timing', he says.

Despite finally realising his life-long dream of being a published author, Richardson has had no time to celebrate his three-book deal. He's been too busy, first polishing *The Damned* with his agent and publisher, and then starting work on its follow-up, with a looming deadline.

'Andrew Lockett, my editor at Duckworth, was extraordinary. World War One is a subject he loves, so he was checking my facts and throwing new things at me: have you heard about such and such? How about putting that in?'

'Ben's input, meanwhile, was more structural. Chapter 4, for example, where as a boy Tacit defends his home from Slovak invaders, was originally Chapter 1. I thought it would be a brutal, eye-opening



start to the book, but Ben suggested putting it later. "Start in WW1 and place the book firmly in the trenches, then come back to Tacit's youth," he told me.'

Tarn loved getting input.

'I'm not arrogant enough to think I know best and I went along with everything they suggested because I thought it was right.'

He jokes: 'Maybe I was so exhausted after writing the first draft that I didn't have any fight left! But actually I was touched, because I'd given the book everything I had and they gave me everything they had to make it better.'

He hammered out the first draft of second book, *The Fallen*, in January, but it was only the beginning of a process that kept him busy until August.

'I write like a painter paints,' he explains. 'The worst thing you can do is look at a blank page and think, "How am I going to fill that?" So I put the shadows in first – the basic structure. Then I go back and embellish it, the way a painter adds more detail. Then I write over the top of that, so you're building it up.'

'The second book was a bit tricky, because you want to make it better than the first. But I think I've nailed it now.'


'Maybe later in the year, when it's delivered and I can find a little breathing space, everything will properly sink in.'

Which just leaves the little matter of his son's commission.

'Will said, "Now that you've got this deal, what am I going to get?" I said he could have £100 but he's not mentioned it since. I'm hoping he's forgotten!'

• See [www.tarnrichardson.co.uk](http://www.tarnrichardson.co.uk)





“I take writing more seriously;  
I increased my confidence; but  
**I also raised the bar** in terms  
of the quality of output  
I demand from myself.”

Lucie, *a student on*  
**‘Writing A Novel’**

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lane' (issue #166), which showed me that a memoir isn't always about the life of an older person but 'a well-written account of an interesting subject', I am attempting to get started.

I am only 23 but have recently been diagnosed with bipolar/schizoaffective disorder. By exploring the lowest moments to the highest and examining the struggles one is subjected to, I believe I can write a tightly focused and fascinating memoir. And it will give me great relief to share my story.

**Laura Stewart,  
Newtownabbey, Belfast**

## TITLE ROLE

I very much enjoyed Douglas McPherson's articles about the writing of his short story, *Teddy Girls*. Only one thing struck me as not right – the bit at the end, when the narrator reveals that, in the present day, her friend Cathy is now mayoress.

I'm certainly not objecting to the revelation itself. It's a lovely twist that Cathy, the former rebel, is now a pillar of the community. But if, as the context suggests, Cathy is leader of the council in her own right, she would be known as 'mayor', not 'mayoress'. In the days when mayors were usually male, the wife of the mayor was known as the mayoress. But today 'mayor's consort' is usually used for both male and female partners.

**Catherine Crosland,  
Hebden Bridge, W Yorks**

*Ed: This is an interesting point because it highlights how important it is to consider your readership. My Weekly was presumably happy to use 'mayoress' because it still means*

*a female mayor, even though 'mayor' is, as you say, now widely used. It's a traditional magazine aimed at a mature readership. It may have a policy to still use gender-specific terms when you know the gender, just to avoid any potential confusion, ie 'Has Cathy had a sex change?' It obviously doesn't get many complaints about such things or they'd have used 'mayor'.*

*It can be a minefield. The Guardian now uses 'actor' instead of 'actress' but it attracts ridicule in the online comments whenever it does. ('Why is actress seen as inferior?' 'Roles are very rarely unisex but specify a man or woman!' 'What next, Her Majesty the King?') But the paper has obviously decided it's what the majority of its readership wants. Newspapers and magazines are businesses, and the customers shape the writing style.*

## WORTH WAITING

I write light-hearted rhyming poetry, and last year I thought several of my poems might be suitable for *People's Friend*. They often published poems in their letters page, Between Friends. I submitted, sat back and waited. And waited. The result: nothing.

I felt disappointed, yet reckoned that for one reason or another, my poems simply weren't *Friend* material. I accepted it, moved on and focused on other writing projects.

Fast forward a year later. To my surprise and delight, I found that my poems had finally been published in the *Friend's* letters page! So don't be too despondent if you don't succeed straight away. Patience is a virtue!

**Sharon Boothroyd,  
Brighouse, W Yorks**

# FIRST DRAFT

Oh dear, it looks like David Mitchell was having a bad writing day. Can you spot the 20 errors in this 'first draft' of *The Bone Clocks*?

Five years later, I take a deep shuddery breath to stop myself crying. It's not just that I can't hold Aoife again, it's everything; it's grief for the regions we deadlanded, the nice caps we melted, the Gulf stream we redirected, the rivers we drained, the coasts we flooded, the lakes we choke with crap, the seas we killed, the species we drove to extinction, the pollinators we wiped out, the oil we squandered, the drugs we rendered important, the comforting liars we voted into office – all so we didn't have to change our cosy lifestyles. People talk about the Endarkenment, like our ancestors talked about the Black Death, as if its an act of God. But we summoned it, with every tank of oil we burnt our weigh through. My generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earths' Riches knowing – while denying – that we'd be doing a runner and leaving our grandchildren a tab that never can be paid

'I'm so sorry, Lol.' I sigh, look around for a box of tissues before remembering our world no longer has issues.

'It's alright, Gran. It's good to remember Mum and Dad.

Upstairs, Rafiq is hoping along the landing – probably pulling on a sock – as he sings in cod-mandarin. Chinese bands are as cool to kids in the Cordon as American New Wave bands were to me.

'We're luckier, in a way,' Lorelei says quietly. 'Mum and Dad didn't... Y'know, it was all over so quickly, and they had each other, and at least we no what happened. But for Raf...'

Sent in by Katie Ashmore, from Fareham, Hants, who wins £25

**Corrections**  
11 the Earth's (singular). 12 that can never (words transposed). 13 be paid. (full stop). 14 I sigh, looking around (wrong word). 15 has tissues. (typo). 16 it's all right (two words). 17 Mum and Dad. (missing speech mark). 18 hopping along the landing (wrong word). 19 sings in Endarkenment like (no comma). 9 as if it's (missing apostrophe). 10 burnt our way (wrong word).

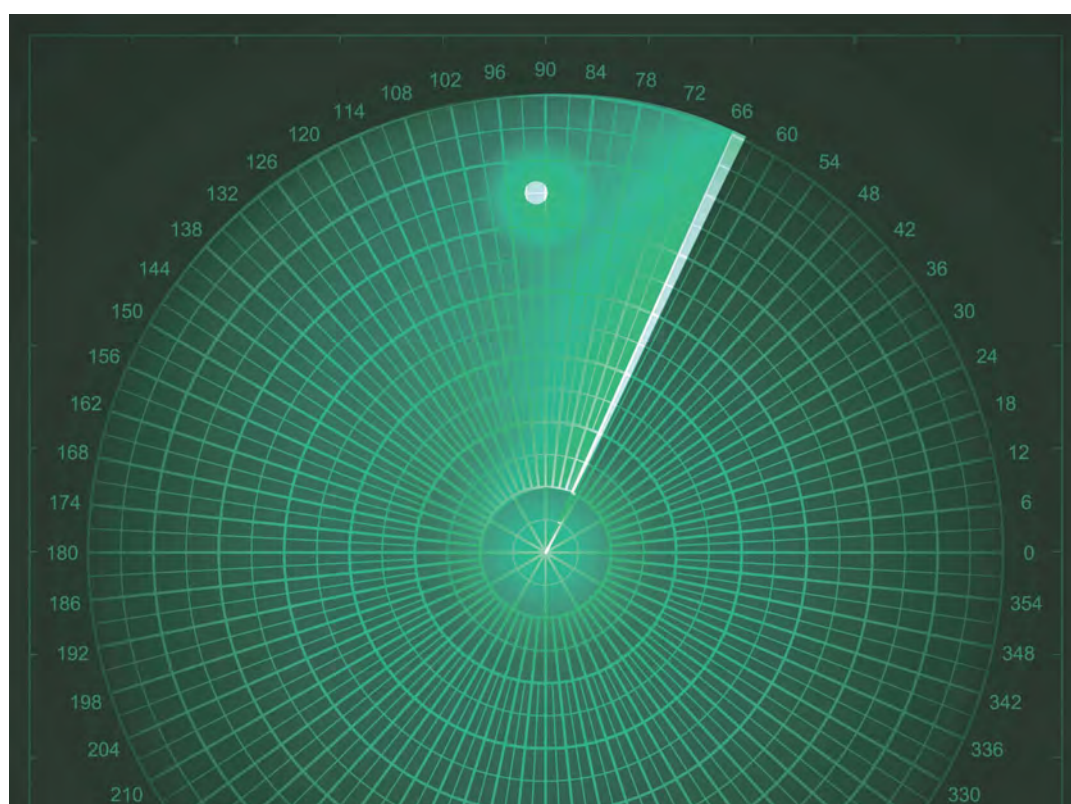
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# GET STARTED



# Making contact

**The world of magazines is scary when you don't know anyone. Douglas McPherson shows you how to introduce yourself**



**N**ina emailed to say she's embarking on a career as a freelance writer but feels a little isolated and wonders if there are any forums where she can talk to others in a similar position.

A good place to start might be joining the NUJ and linking up with local writers that way. There are also groups for women writers, such as the Society of Women Writers and Journalists ([www.swwj.co.uk](http://www.swwj.co.uk)) and there's a supportive network of women's magazine fiction writers, some of whom

also write articles, at [www.womagwriter.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.womagwriter.blogspot.co.uk). Joining in with blogs is a good way to interact with writers.

However, freelance journalists do seem to be more isolated by nature – and some are downright competitive, defending their territory. If you review film and theatre or report on sporting events, you'll meet other writers in the press enclosure. But most freelances probably spend more time talking to editors and press officers than they do their fellow scribes. After 20 years in the game I can't say

I actually know anyone else doing the same work I do.

That's not to say it's an unsociable job – I'm constantly interviewing interesting people and visiting places and events that I write about. But it does mean that one of the most important qualities a freelance needs is the ability to be a self-starter.

## Door-knocking

Many of us have been brought up with the unhelpful belief that it's not what you know but who you know. That's discouraging for any would-be

writer who knows nobody in the field – especially when you can open any paper and see columns given to celebrities and the relatives of famous writers.

But the fact is you don't need any pre-existing media contacts to begin selling articles. I didn't have any when I started, and I still regularly sell articles to editors who wouldn't know me from Adam.

If you pitch a good topical idea that fits the magazine, and can demonstrate a sound reason why you are qualified to write the piece (for example, you have personal experience of the subject), then a decent editor will buy your work.

The best place to start is with specialist magazines where knowledge of the subject will be more important than previous writing experience. Then, as you develop a track record, you can use your combined subject knowledge and journalistic credentials to approach more general mags and newspapers.

## What you know

Editors and readers are looking for articles full of insight and penned with passion, so the key to selling them is to write about the things you know best and have the greatest enthusiasm for.

Jobs and hobbies are a good starting point and any trade or hobby mag you already read will often provide your first sale – and quite possibly



One of the most important qualities a freelance needs is the ability to be a self-starter

a continuous run of work for years to come.

Nina says she's coming from a previous career as a singer-songwriter, so that would make her perfectly placed to write for the many music mags devoted to every genre and probably every instrument.

The first article I sold was a gig review. From reviewing gigs, CDs and DVDs, I began interviewing singers for the same mag and then interviewing them for a wider range of mags. As a country music fan I wouldn't have been qualified to review reggae. But once I began writing for mags such as *Guitarist* and *Keyboard Player* I had no problem interviewing musicians in all genres from pop to jazz and classical, because an interview with a guitarist follows much the same pattern whatever style they play.

#### Flexible work

Nina mentioned switching from a singing career to writing

because she wanted a career more compatible with being a mother to her six-year-old son. Writing is a good option for anyone who wants to fit work around other commitments. You can easily arrange a writing life around the school run, or work at whatever late or early hours of the day you find most convenient. By researching online and interviewing by phone, you only have to leave the house as often as you wish to.

When I started out, I lived in the suburbs of London and travelled into town for most interviews because it was fun to go backstage at theatres and recording studios or visit swanky hotels. But while meeting an interviewee in person can add atmosphere to a feature, devoting too much time to travelling isn't cost effective. These days I live out in the sticks and interview almost exclusively by phone.

Nina could, however, make her son one of the focuses of

her writing career. While the pram in the hallway may be the supposed enemy of good art (according to 1930s writer Cyril Connolly) parenting issues are a fertile ground for today's article writers.

During the school holidays, Nina could write about days out with her son, reviewing theme parks, children's shows or child-friendly restaurants and holidays. There's a big market for articles on places of interest and things to do in the holidays – with the added bonus that if you sell the article before you go, you can usually arrange free tickets, travel and accommodation.

#### Location, location

Finally, Nina wonders whether it makes a difference that she lives in Northern Ireland. Because you can conduct a freelance career by phone and email, it doesn't matter where a writer resides. You can, however, often use your location to your advantage. There may be regional magazines that want writers with local knowledge, or you could write about people, places and events in your area for national or even international magazines that have no other contributors in your part of the world. Don't forget websites too.

It's easy to feel isolated and unsupported as a writer, and especially as a new writer with no contacts, but that's the position nearly all of us are in when we set out.

Hopefully I've shown Nina and everyone else reading that wherever you are in the country and whatever your background and circumstances, there's a warm welcome waiting in the world of writing. You just have to reach out and make contact.



## TAKE THE STEP

### Lesson 1

**You really don't need any previous contacts to sell articles. Just find out the email address of the editor or appropriate section editor and pitch them an idea that would be a good fit.**

### Lesson 2

**Write about the things you know most about or have the greatest enthusiasm for – your specialist knowledge and passion will be your biggest selling points and specialist mags will offer your best opportunities for a first sale.**

### Lesson 3

**It doesn't matter where you live, but writing about things in your area can give you an advantage.**

### Homework

**Pop into your local library or town hall and find the rack of leaflets for local attractions: zoos, stately homes, steam railways, theatre brochures. Take a bundle home and see what you could write about, be it a 'day out' feature for a travel mag or an interview with a singer coming to a local venue.**

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Douglas shares writing tips he's learned through experience

### #9 Life is deaf: knock loudly

Success as a writer depends as much on persistence as ability. A freelance must expect to have many more pitches declined than accepted. In many cases, busy editors won't even reply, which can make you wonder if it's worth bothering to approach them. Believe me, it is! Sometimes I've had a dozen pitches ignored by the same editor only to one day hit him or her with an idea they want to buy. On other occasions, I've hawked the same idea to a dozen different magazines, come close to giving up, emailed one more and got a sale. So don't give up. Maximise your chances by pitching articles for regular slots or specific sections of the mag. Phone to make sure you're still pitching to the right person (they often change). Pitch topical ideas early enough. Above all, keep knocking on doors and knock loudly. Eventually one will open!

■ If you have a question about getting started as a writer, please email Douglas at [gettingstarted@writers-forum.com](mailto:gettingstarted@writers-forum.com)

• Douglas McPherson's non-fiction book *Circus Mania* is now available in an Amazon Kindle edition.



# BREAK THE ICE

Does your writing group seem stuck in a rut? Sally Jenkins offers some quick exercises to get you working together more effectively

How cohesive is your writing group? Do you feel comfortable and confident with the other members? Are first-time visitors successfully converted into new recruits? Is everyone engaged and ready to take an active part in meetings?

A successful writing group must have a motivated membership that meets in a culture of trust and respect. Newbie writers need to be welcomed into a supportive atmosphere where everyone, regardless of ability or experience, is treated well. Such a friendly, enthusiastic environment doesn't happen by magic; it takes effort and reinforcement at each meeting – but it can be fun too.

The secret is to regularly include short icebreaker and energising activities on the meeting's agenda.

## ICEBREAKERS

These are structured activities designed to relax people and allow them to get to know each other better. They often require members to work together in random pairings or small groups, thus helping to break up cliques. Just as icebreaker ships in the Arctic make it easier for other ships to travel, an icebreaker activity clears the way for the rest of the writers' group meeting to run smoothly, because everyone feels comfortable with their colleagues and is switched into 'writing group' mode.

A good icebreaker activity requires little in the way of props and should take no longer than 10 minutes, thus leaving plenty of time for the main business of the meeting. Try starting with the following activity, which encourages small group working and energises the mind for more 'formal' writing later.

### Story Cards

Beforehand prepare several envelopes (one for every four members of the group). Into each envelope put six cards. On two of these write the name of a character, eg Lucy Smith (elderly widow), Wayne (teenage vandal), on two of the cards specify an object, eg Coffin, Postcard, on the fifth card suggest a location, eg Doctor's

You may get groans but, used properly, icebreakers serve a useful purpose

surgery and on the final card state either Happy ending or Sad ending. The sets of cards should be different in each envelope.

On the day, split the members into groups of four, separating close friends or cliques. Give each group an envelope and ask them to incorporate the words on the cards into a very short story. Stipulate that each person must contribute at least one sentence and that there is only five minutes to complete the task. When the time is up, ask each group to read their story aloud and expect lots of laughter at the ridiculous storylines that emerge!

Julie Phillips is author of *The Writers' Group Handbook: Getting the Best From Your Writing Group*. She says, 'Mention the word icebreaker to any group and you're likely to get moans and groans, but, when used properly, they serve a useful purpose and can be fun.

'It's important to fit the right icebreaker to the right group. Writing groups have different demographics and will respond to things in different ways – a one-size icebreaker will not fit all.'

A newly formed group of relative strangers might find this exercise useful.

### People Bingo

Prepare a 'bingo card' on a sheet of A4 paper. Create a grid of squares (number of squares should equal number of members) and in each square write a simple question which can be answered by talking to other members. For example, 'Who has a pet and what is it?' or 'Discover someone's favourite book' or 'Who has met someone famous?' There will be no right or wrong answers.

On the day, give everyone a copy of the bingo card and ask them to go around the room talking to each person in turn and to fill in a

different name in each square. Don't forget to join in yourself!

Writing tutors are often adept at getting their class to feel relaxed and energised for writing. Writers' groups can benefit from copying some of these techniques.

Helen Yendall runs a writing class in the Cotswolds and she keeps her icebreakers short and sharp.

'Icebreakers shouldn't last longer than 10 or 15 minutes, or the novelty wears off,' she explains. 'Also, some people dislike the very idea so don't explicitly call it that, just introduce it as "the next activity". Reassure people that no one's going to be put on the spot or made to look stupid.

'I've also found it's really useful to have a kitchen timer to hand – that way, you don't have to keep checking the time and you, as the organiser, can also join in with the fun.'

Another tutor, Debbie Wilkinson, has a favourite activity.

'I ask everyone to think of something that has given them pleasure, or something they're pleased they've done or achieved. It could be a hobby, a new grandchild, a holiday or anything. I ask them to write it on a note and put it in the centre of the table, then I shuffle them up, and each person picks out another person's note and reads it aloud.

'Whoever the note belongs to identifies themselves and they can either say more if they want to – and most people usually do – or just say something easy like, "Yes,

I really enjoyed it." This relieves shyer members of the group from having to say much, yet gives everyone else





a little insight into that person's life.'

Betty Taylor from Codsall Writers' Group emphasises this need to be aware that newer recruits in particular might be reticent about participating in activities.

'New members usually feel pretty timid at first and should be treated gently. It's important that more vociferous members aren't allowed to dominate the meeting. Make it a priority to let everyone present have their fair share of 'floor time', ie time to read their piece and receive group feedback, otherwise members get fed up and leave.'

Julie Phillips has some advice for avoiding cliques.

'Members should be encouraged to chat to and sit next to others they don't know very well. This can be turned into a game, rather like musical chairs without the music. For each section of the meeting everyone swaps seats.'

## ENERGISERS

These are a good way to switch a group's attention from one topic or section of the meeting to a completely different one. The activity should inject a burst of energy into the group and get them awake and alert for what is to follow.

For example, if you've started a session with a business meeting or some reading aloud for critique or a talk on a writing-related subject, some members may have switched off a little or perhaps they've relaxed and are no longer in a 'doing' mode. The energiser activity will get them primed and ready to go again. Ideally it will involve some movement by members because moving creates energy.

### Airplanes

*This is a useful energiser activity because it contains an element of a 'getting to know you' icebreaker as well as some movement. It's a more energetic variant of Debbie Wilkinson's icebreaker above.*

*Each person writes a fact about themselves on a piece of A4 paper and then folds it into a paper airplane. The group forms two lines*

*a short distance apart and facing each other. Then they throw the paper planes towards the opposite line. Everyone bends and picks up a plane. They unfold it, read the fact aloud and guess who the fact belongs to.*

Sometimes it's good to encourage people to think as well as getting them on their feet, as in the exercise below.

### The Chain

*Ask the group to stand in a circle. The organiser walks across the circle and chooses a member. She introduces herself and says, 'I love going to the zoo.' The person chosen then walks across the circle, selects a different member, introduces herself and says a sentence beginning with the word 'zoo', for example 'Zoo souvenir shops sell cuddly toys.'*

*The next member chosen must walk across the circle to someone else and start their sentence with the word 'toys'. The activity continues with each person starting a sentence with the word that ended the previous person's phrase.*

Energisers can be useful in priming a group for an instant writing exercise. Many of us find instant writing difficult but an energiser tailored to the theme of the exercise may help people feel more confident about tackling it. For example, for a travel writing evening, the airplanes could contain the thrower's favourite holiday experience or for a haiku-themed meeting it could contain a couple of words describing a preferred season or aspect of nature.

The variety of icebreaker and energiser activities available is limited only by your imagination and there are many examples online. But remember, they should be short, fun and no one should be put on the spot or embarrassed.

The last word goes to Julie Phillips.

'Never force any group member to take part if they really don't want to. That's counterproductive. One of the best icebreakers is for the group to sit down around a table with a cuppa and cake and have an informal chat. People will gravitate naturally to each other when they are relaxed.'

# PERFECT for WRITING RETREATS



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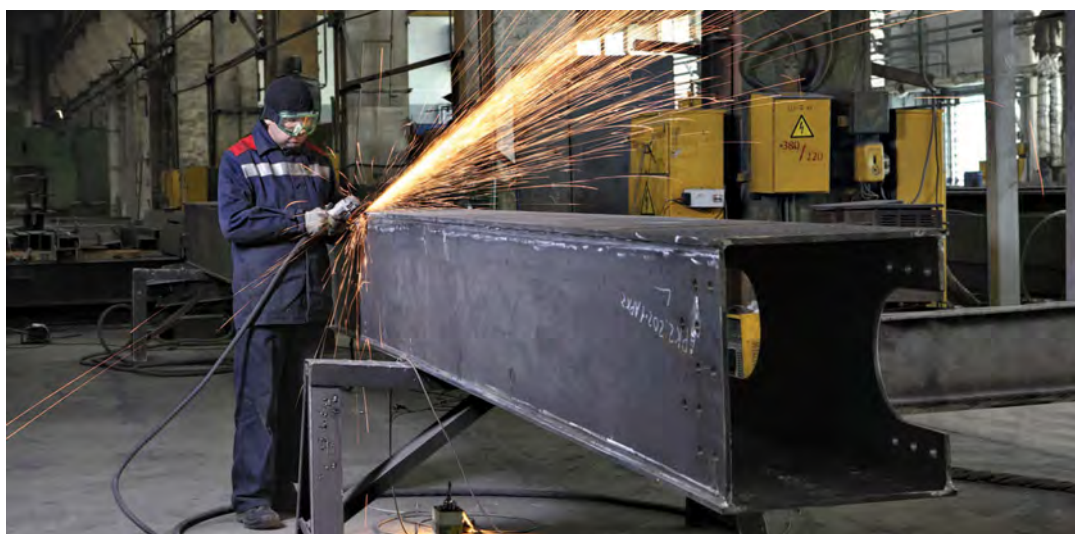
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# Adding that extra spark



**Barbara Dynes** explains how to cast a critical eye over your work to help secure a sale – and sets some exercises

**S**o you've finished your short story, article or novel and it's ready to send out. But is it? With all the competition these days, your manuscript must stand out from the rest. This vital ingredient – call it spark, zip, sharpness or whatever – is essential.

Now, you will have revised your work, in order to get it as perfect as possible, but this 'extra' is something else. It is all about making the manuscript really special.

Bearing that in mind, we'll concentrate this month on the actual words, sentence construction and presentation.

## Ideas

You will have put in a lot of valuable thinking time before you started – about your idea, the construction, perhaps the end of the piece. You will also have

researched your market and know the idea will suit. But is it original enough? As we all know, it's really difficult to get fresh ideas and much too tempting to use old ones. Is yours a bit 'old hat'?

If so, you might need to add to it, turn it on its head or completely twist it around. Otherwise – however good your writing – the story, novel or article will fail. Any re-writing will be worth it, in order to come up with something different.

## First or third person?

In fiction, which viewpoint you choose can make a tremendous difference to the style. For instance, if you've used third person for your humorous short story and it's reading 'heavier' than it should, changing to first person might help. You'll then get right into the 'I' character's

mind – and his or her way of thinking can be frivolous, scatty or downright odd, which will lighten the content no end. It all depends on the market you're writing for and the complexity required.

## Tense

Using present tense, especially in a really short story, can make it more immediate and snappy. This 'sharpening' of the style can add so much to the tone. But again, consider your market: does that magazine accept present tense stories?

Past tense is 'the norm' and is probably better for a longer, emotional, more character-driven story, but there are no 'rules'. Some excellent novels, such as Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, have been written entirely in the present tense. Ask yourself: does the tense suit the storyline?

## Grammar

Boring, I know, but it has to be said: if your work is peppered with grammatical errors and bad spelling the editor will stop reading on the premise that, if the author can't be bothered to get that right, the story itself is likely to be as sloppily done.

Too many clichés – 'this moment in time', 'cold as ice', 'he was a real wet blanket' – will dull your work considerably, as will dated words and phrases. If you spot any, think again and try to come up with something new.

Have you used too many adjectives and adverbs? Readers skate over surplus description, with the result that it loses its effect. For example: 'the grey, sluggish, slow-moving river' – the sentence would be better with just one of those adjectives. (Sluggish and slow-moving mean the same, anyway.) Work out if you could be using a stronger single adjective/adverb instead, or, better still, a stronger noun or verb in the first place.

## Adverbs

- *It was a very exciting film*
- *The view was absolutely amazing*
- *A truly perfect meal*
- *'I really am sorry,' she said apologetically.*

'Very', 'absolutely', 'truly' and 'apologetically' are all surplus words in those sentences and do nothing for them.

Check for unnecessary words: 'the crowded bus was always full'; 'lots of young teenagers'; 'he shouted loudly'. You don't need the words in italics.

## Style and presentation

We all unthinkingly repeat ourselves, especially at first draft



Readers skate over surplus description, with the result that it loses its effect

stage. Unnecessary repetition of words can be jarring, yet easily put right by substituting an alternative. Watch for repetition in content, too; for instance, having characters comment on what has already been got across to the reader, perhaps in thoughts or narrative.

Split any long, convoluted sentences, which certainly won't add spark to your work. Most commercial magazines prefer sentences short and sharp. They are usually better kept short in active, tense scenes, such as a chase – suggesting movement, tension and breathlessness. A thought-provoking, reflective situation will command a slower pace, perhaps with longer sentences to match the mood.

Lengthy paragraphs – huge blocks of narrative – can look stodgy and uninviting on the page. Break them up into readable chunks. Fiction or non-fiction, your work will then be much easier to read.

Sometimes you may have to rearrange the writing so that a break in time or shift in thought can correctly start a new paragraph. The presentation will benefit no end.

### Punctuation

Don't overdo commas – leave in just enough to make the prose clear. Reading aloud will tell you where you need a pause, and probably a comma, to make sense of the piece.

Semi-colons are useful when you want a break in the sentence yet don't really need a full stop, but they are not used as much as dashes today. Again, check the style when researching your particular market.

Exclamation marks must be used very sparingly, except perhaps in dialogue. Overuse of these gives an amateurish impression. Certainly never be tempted to put double or treble (!! or !!!) exclamation marks. The odd one is sometimes necessary, but if the sentence is already humorous it can look as though the author needs to qualify his own work.

### What to look for

The following is a brief list of points that could be preventing your work from standing out from the rest. When you've finished polishing your completed manuscript, go through it once more to check:

- Whether that old idea is re-vamped enough
- Whether you have used the right viewpoint and tense
- Any bad grammar
- Use of clichés
- Over-use of adjectives, adverbs and exclamation marks
- Repetition of words/content
- Over-long sentences and paragraphs

The best tip is to read your work aloud. Any faults and lack of writerly 'spark' will show up immediately.

### Next month

How to add spark to characters, dialogue, setting, etc.

Barbara Dynes' latest book, *Masterclasses in Creative Writing*, is published by Constable & Robinson at £9.99



# Writers' FORUM EXERCISE

## Give life to dull writing

**A** Substitute your own phrases in place of these clichés.

■ Her face was as red as a beetroot.

■ He was grasping at straws.

■ Her eyes shone.

■ He had left no stone unturned.

Completed / /

My scene rating /

**B** Rewrite the following piece, adding some vital spark. Cut long sentences, repeated words, and unnecessary adjectives and adverbs and correct the tense errors, etc. Where would you break the paragraph?

Jane was walking her little brown terrier dog in the park which was a very big spacious park and she had lots of friends who also walked their dogs in the same park. Her legs feel like lead and she feels as cold as ice in the biting wind. Jane is really fed up because her boy friend hadn't turned up last night to her birthday party at a nearby club and she felt a silly fool because lots of her pals were there and started talking about him so she was angry as a bull. As she walks around the freezing cold windy park she saw a guy she saw a few weeks ago in the local high street bank and she fancied him at the time and still fancies him now. So she went up to the tall dark slim guy who also had a big dalmation dog that growled loudly but she ignored it and grinned widely at the guy. 'Don't fancy meeting your dog on a dark night!!!' Jane giggles loudly at him. He just stared at her glowering like mad as if he'd like to murder her then he walked on very quickly. Well that was a turn up for the books she thought and decided to go home, beginning to run very quickly. She would catch some boring tedious awful programmes on the telly which would just about send her to sleep thank goodness.

Completed / /

My scene rating /

# INSIDE STORY

## Douglas McPherson explains why the beginning of his pocket novel *Closer!* was the last part he wrote

Sometimes it's best to begin with the end and end with the beginning. That's the big lesson I learned when I went from writing short stories to my first *My Weekly Pocket Novel*.

As a short story writer, I already appreciated the importance of knowing the end before you start writing. The final twist or parting message is what makes a story, so it can be more profitable to spend your time thinking up good endings and then working out the stories that lead up to them, than coming up with cracking beginnings and trying to figure out where they might lead.

In a longer work, meanwhile, knowing the end will pull you out of the biggest pitfall for the aspiring novelist: petering out halfway through. So when I began writing *Closer!* I knew exactly how the final scenes would play out.

### Beginning

What I hadn't realised, was how much you can learn about your characters and themes between typing 'Chapter One' and 'The End' – and how you can use that knowledge to go back and write a better beginning than you might have the first time around.

Beginnings have to do a tremendous amount of work: hook you in with some action; introduce the main character and his/her goal; establish the setting and, ideally, foreshadow some of the main themes of the story we're about to read.

That can be hard to do if you don't yet know much about your character or what the themes of your book will be,

*A wedding scene would signal romance more clearly than Jess's comedic dash to a job interview*

because you haven't written it yet. Even if you work out the plot before you start, a lot of things will only come to you as you write.

So although you have to start somewhere, and an inspiring opening can provide the impetus for a writerly voyage into the unknown, never assume that the first page you type has to be the first page of the finished manuscript. Once you've finished your story and know exactly what it's about, it's a good idea to rewrite the beginning – or even craft a whole new beginning – with the assurance of an author who knows where the story is heading.

### First draft

*Closer!* was an office romance between Jess and her boss, Jared, so it seemed obvious to begin with their first meeting: Jess going for an interview to become his secretary.

The story was to be a romantic comedy, and I'll admit I set out with more interest in the comedy than the romance. So, seeing it like the opening shots of a movie – with some jaunty background music playing in my head – I began with Jess hurrying, late, along a high street in an ill-fitting business suit she picked up in sale. Her expectations are low: she fully expects it to be another in a string of dead-end

jobs – although she quite liked the sound of the guy she spoke to on the phone.

Finding the insalubrious office up some stairs behind a betting shop, she discovers that she's so late Jared is in the middle of inducting a room full of sales recruits.

Unable to see what's going on, because they're all standing up, she edges her way around the side of the room in search of a better view, before the claustrophobic atmosphere starts to get the better of her. Feeling she's about to faint, she tries to open a sash window but it won't budge. With increasing desperation, she puts all her might into the effort and, with the grunt of a weight lifter, eventually slams it open with a bang that turns every head her way, including Jared's.

### Second thoughts

I liked the comic pace of that opening and the embarrassment that coloured Jess' first meeting with the man of her dreams. The rest of the story flowed nicely from it and, fortunately, *My Weekly Pocket Novel* editor Maggie Swinburne liked the book as a whole.

But before she bought it, she asked if I could rewrite the beginning with, in her words, 'a little less franticism'. In its place, she wanted a bit more back story for Jess and

an explanation of why Jess was single.

I'll admit I was miffed. The 'franticism' was my opening's appeal for me, and I was loathe to lose it. But then, as I've said, I was perhaps putting too much emphasis on comedy and not enough on romance.

As to why Jess was single, my reaction was: 'She just is!' She was only 22, after all.

Once I'd calmed down and thought about Maggie's comments, though, I had to agree that Jess was a bit short of back story. When we met her hurrying along the high street it was like she'd appeared out of thin air. There was no sense of where she was hurrying from – either in terms of where she lived or her life up to that point.

The reason was that it's very easy to begin a story knowing little more about your characters than a general feel for how they behave. You fill out their background and discover more about them as you go along.

So, having got to the end of *Closer!*, what did I know about Jess that I didn't know when I started? Well, I'd taken her on a journey of personal development, from being an unambitious, rather timid dreamer drifting through life to someone who found the confidence to take control of her destiny.

But although I thought she came across as a well-rounded personality, there was zero mention of her life outside the office. It was as if she didn't have any parents, siblings or friends... or did she?

In a sudden light-bulb



moment, I remembered a key scene in which the normally scruffy Jess impresses Jared by wearing a red velvet suit she'd bought for the wedding of her glamorous friend Becky. But Becky wasn't mentioned again, and how long ago the wedding had been wasn't specified – it was just a reason for Jess owning the suit that I thought up on the spur of the moment.

But supposing the wedding was immediately before the events in the story and I began the novel there?

### Starting over

The first rule of romantic fiction is that it should be romantic, so a wedding scene would signal romance much more clearly than Jess's comedic dash down the high street to a job interview.

That scene could come later, say on the Monday morning after the Saturday wedding, when her return to the reality of her life would be given emotional context by the wedding that preceded it: Jess is jealous of Becky being on honeymoon in Barbados while she is rushing off to be interviewed for a dead-end job.

The wedding of a friend would also be a good point for Jess to reflect on her own romantic dreams and current single status.

In fact, I decided to slip in the fact that another of her friends, Ellie, had also got hitched a couple of months before. So, even though she's so young, it's reasonable that Jess could be starting to feel left behind. The two weddings would also explain why Jess doesn't turn to her pals throughout the novel. It's not that she's friendless, simply that Becky is on honeymoon and Ellie is busily newlywed and currently out of Jess's loop.

As to why Jess is single, I decided she has just broken up with a guy called Leo and is trying to explain to Becky why she did so:

*'Where were the trumpets?' She heard herself almost shouting,*

*above the din. 'Where was that bolt from the blue that knocks you off your feet?'*

That revelation of what Jess is looking for in a man subsequently helped me underline the impact of her first meeting with Jared a few pages later:

*'She had a crazy impulse to phone Becky in Barbados and say, 'Remember what I was saying about trumpets and thunderbolts...?!'*

When Jess phones, however, Becky just laughs:

*'You're such a dreamer, Jess. I don't think you know what you want.'*

Although said in jest, the comment gives Jess pause to wonder whether she is just a dreamer compared to Becky, who has always known what she wants and how to get it.

And so, my new beginning did several things my initial intro hadn't. It:

- Set a more romantic tone.
- Gave Jess a back story that made her more real.
- Established what she was looking for in a relationship (the main character's problem or goal should always be clear from the outset).
- Foreshadowed the book's central theme of confidence and personal development.

Introducing all those elements in the opening pages gave the pocket novel a much stronger structure and helped it to read like the work of an author who knew where they were going, rather than winging it as they went along.

I wouldn't have been able to write a beginning like that if I hadn't written the whole novel first. So next time, I'll definitely go back and write the beginning last.

### Next issue

Keeping minor characters under control.



Linford Romance Library

# Julia Douglas Closer!



### Closer!! Chapter 1

I don't know why you didn't just stick with Leo!' That was easy for Becky to say – radiant in her going away dress and about to fly half way around the world on her honeymoon.

Jess wouldn't have admitted it, but as she sat on the church pew earlier and watched Becky sweep by in her dazzling white confection, she had indeed found herself thinking how easily that could have been her, standing in front of the smiling vicar, saying 'I do.' She'd felt a similar wistful twinge when her other friend, Ellie, got hitched a few months before.

But it was the sun through the stained glass that made her eyes go blinky and blurry. It was the organ music, the wedding cake dress and the church bells that gave her lower lip the wobbles. It wasn't the memory of Leo himself.

Competing with the music and laughter of the reception, Jess found it hard to explain why. After all, he was good looking, kind... he wouldn't be hard to 'stick with'. But, as usual, Jess hadn't let things with Leo even get off the ground.

'Where were the trumpets?' She heard herself almost shouting, above the din. 'Where was that bolt from the blue that knocks you off your feet?'

'You sound more like you want to be struck by lightning!' Becky laughed.

'Isn't that what everyone wants?' Jess asked. Hadn't it been like that for Becky? She wanted to ask, but a noisy wedding reception on the dot of midnight was no place for a heart to heart. Becky had a hundred and one well-wishers vying for her attention and a whole new life waiting for her in a vintage Rolls-Royce outside.

The last thing Jess heard Becky say, before she was swept away in the crowd was, 'You're such a dreamer, Jess! I don't think you know what you want!'

It was said laughingly, but as Jess was left standing alone, champagne glass in hand, amid the partying crowd, the words stung her like a slap.

• *Closer!* by Julia Douglas (Douglas' pen name) is available to download or borrow from libraries

# HOW TO BREAK INTO... VAMPIRE TALES

Phil Barrington talks to three authors who have staked out a career

Love them or hate them, vampires are everywhere. From horror to historical, vicious to vegetarian, they've all found success. Here some writers of vampire tales give their tips.

## Why vampires?

**Suzanne McLeod:** I've always loved reading about things that go bump in the night and, years ago, discovered American paranormal romance and urban fantasy, in which the heroes and heroines are often also the monsters. The most popular monster has always been the vampire – the ultimate bad boy/girl, dangerous, seductive, sophisticated and immortal.

**Mark Jackman:** I spent five years writing a trilogy of novels about vampires even though I'm not really a fanboy. It's only just occurred to me how odd that is. My novels are a comedy about northern England combined with vampire horror. While many would argue the Land of

With imagination,  
and fangs, any  
character can be turned  
into a vampire

the Midnight Sun would prove the most inhospitable of terrains for a vampire, I firmly believe they'd find more trouble in a council estate pub in Middlesbrough.

**Amanda Grange:** My interest started with *Dracula* and continued with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, during which it struck me that the characters had counterparts in *Pride and Prejudice*. Buffy is Elizabeth Bennet, Willow is like Jane and Angel is like Mr Darcy. The idea of Mr Darcy as a vampire stayed with me.

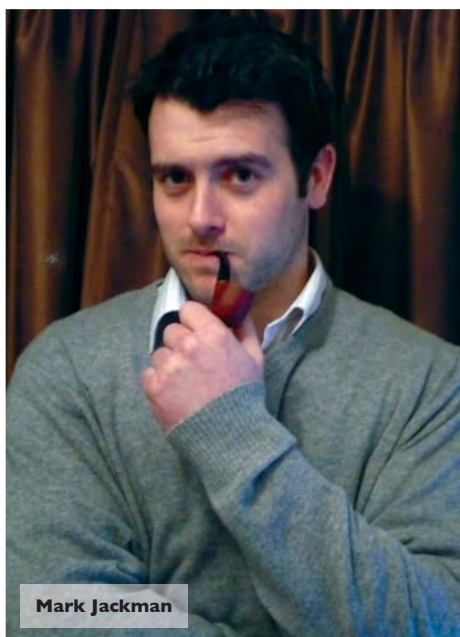
## How did you get started?

**Suzanne:** It was my favourite genre and I wrote the book I wanted to read. Once I had my story, I researched how to get published, following the advice in writing books and magazines and on the internet. They said to write the best book I could before submitting, and to do that I needed feedback. So I joined an online critique group specialising in fantasy, and went to various writing conferences where agents and publishers gave new writers critiques. An agent at a conference loved my story and offered representation, then sold my first book and two others in my *Spellcrackers* series to Gollancz.

**Mark:** I'm a scientist and when we construct sentences we make them unambiguous but terribly unattractive and inaccessible to the general public. Once my novel was finished I sent it everywhere. Big mistake. Finally, Jim Brown from LL-Publications said he liked my story but



Suzanne McLeod

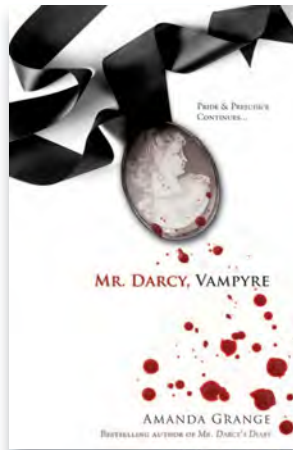
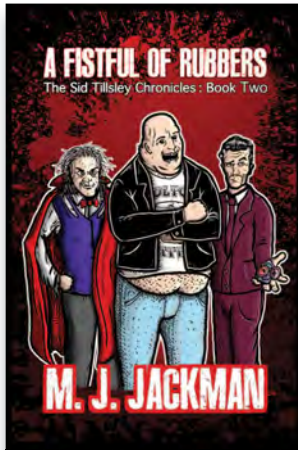


Mark Jackman



Amanda Grange





added: 'Son, you have to learn how to write.' After I spent a considerable time learning the ropes and working on the manuscript, LL-Publications published *The Sid Tillsley Chronicles*. Everyone can find a home for their work if the writing is good enough.

### Where do you get your ideas?

**Mark:** Inspiration can come from anywhere. If you're not creative, you're probably not going to start writing in the first place; not fiction, anyway. Write an instructional manual or something.

**Suzanne:** Ideas come from asking questions. Imagine a teen sees a vampire killing someone. So, some basic questions: *What was the teen doing when they saw the murder? Who does the vampire kill? Where does the killing happen? Why doesn't the vampire kill the teen too? When does the kill take place? How does the teen react? Is the teen even human? Are vampires secret or a known part of the world?* Brainstorm as many answers until the story starts to gel, and then start writing. And keep asking more questions including the most important one: *What happens next and why?*

### Can vampires fit into any genre?

**Amanda:** Books are about people and vampires are just dead people so they can work in any kind of book. They're very popular in romantic fiction and of course horror, but they also appear in science fiction and all kinds of other genres.

**Mark:** Humorous vampire novels aren't as popular as I'd like them to be.

**Suzanne:** Vampires are versatile. They can be a world-weary private investigator, the cute girl next door, a murderous psychopath, an ER doctor, or even a huge hairy cat, as in Christopher Moore's *Bite Me*. With imagination, and fangs, any character can be turned into a vampire.

**Amanda:** Regency period is a natural fit

for vampires. John Polidori's, *The Vampyre* started the literary vampire tradition and was published in 1819, just six years after *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr Darcy is a mysterious figure. We don't have a lot of access to his thoughts so it's possible to imagine all sorts of things about him. My *Mr Darcy, Vampyre* hit the market at the right time and my publisher, Sourcebooks, gave it a lot of support. It's one of my bestselling titles and created a huge buzz in the media, which still goes on six years later. Readers either love it or hate it but I've had a surprising number of emails from people telling me it inspired them to write their own books.

### How does anyone follow *Dracula*?

**Mark:** Obvious jokes aside, I'd say it's nigh on impossible to write something truly original. Have fun. Put your own spin on the legends.

**Amanda:** One of the reasons *Mr Darcy, Vampyre* appealed to me was because its origins date back to a time before *Dracula*. I was inspired by Polidori's story as well as the fragment by Lord Byron on which Polidori's story is based. I turned to English folklore for inspiration. For instance, my vampires become insubstantial between night and day and dawn and dusk. That's taken directly from English folklore.

### Was there any research involved?

**Suzanne:** For anyone to write about vampires, or anything else, they need to know what stories and genre conventions are already out there, not only in myths and legends and books, but in TV and film too. I don't think anyone can write well in a genre they don't love and if a writer tries to write in a genre they're not familiar with then they risk their story feeling tired and stale, something that will be unappealing to publishers and especially readers. So yes, research is a must.

### Is there a wide readership?

**Mark:** Undoubtedly. They're out there and if someone can tell me where they are I'd really appreciate it! The public love vampires, even the sparkly ones. If you love vampires, write about vampires (or get a rubbish tattoo).

### Do I need to write books or is there a market for short stories?

**Mark:** Write what you want to write. Don't try to pander to a market. That said, no one wants to read your vampire haiku. No one.

**Suzanne:** The market for traditionally published short stories is a relatively small one. If an author wants to follow the traditional route and see their work in print I'd recommend writing novels. However, everyone can self-publish their own ebooks, whether they be novels, novellas or short stories. Short ebook stories – set in the same world and featuring the same, or linked, characters – can be a way to quickly publish new content on a regular basis, and for authors to hopefully find readers who love their work, without the same time commitment that it takes to write a full-length novel.

### Any top tips?

**Mark:** Same for any job. Work out why you're doing this and what you want to get out of it.

**Suzanne:** Read widely across all vampire fiction. *Dracula* and *The Vampyre* followed by *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson, Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Count Saint-Germain books. Then the more modern authors such as Charlaine Harris, Laurell K Hamilton, Stephenie Meyer, John Ajvide Lindqvist, Jim Butcher and LJ Smith, to name a few.

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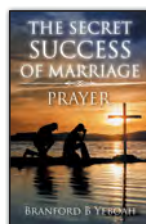
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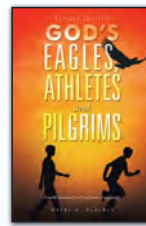
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# Technophobia



**Keir Thomas** looks at the humble – but absolutely vital – keyboard

## KEYS TO SUCCESS



It's an item usually overlooked in the IT pantheon, but for those who spend their time writing, the keyboard is the main physical interface to the page. There's a surprising amount of variety across models and it pays huge dividends in output and accuracy to get the best. A good keyboard can make all the difference between comfort and agony.

### The basics

Let's get the boring stuff over with by talking about plugs and sockets. Keyboards nowadays use USB connections, just like printers and other hardware. Just plug one in and it'll work. No software is required, strictly speaking, but some keyboards come with apps to let you use the additional row of 'multimedia' keys running along the top. Whether you install this is up to you.

If your computer is of a more vintage year, then you might find it uses a PS/2 keyboard connector. These are circular plugs and are usually coloured purple. It doesn't make any difference which connector you use, and if your computer is so creakily old that it doesn't

have USB ports – or if all the USB ports are already in use – then you can get a USB-to-PS/2 adapter on sites like eBay. These are cheap as chips.

### Switch on the wireless

The second consideration is whether to go wireless. There's certainly a lot of convenience in being able to put the keyboard where you want, including on your lap while you lounge around, and there's no performance difference between a wireless and cable connection – you can type at 200 words per minute on both, if you're capable.

Two different technologies are used for wireless: Bluetooth and 2.4GHz. Unless you've a Mac or higher-end PC then forget about Bluetooth. Such keyboards are more expensive anyway and typically designed for use with tablets, so more compact than standard keyboards and they typically feature modifier keys for Apple hardware (I'll explain what this means in a minute).

2.4GHz keyboards are typically cheap and come with a tiny USB 'dongle' that you keep constantly plugged in to your computer. The keyboard itself uses batteries (usually

two AA) to communicate with the dongle. You can expect anywhere between two to six months of battery life, and you can sit up to 10 metres away and still stay within range. 2.4GHz wireless keyboards often come with a wireless mouse too. The mouse will very likely eat batteries like they're Ferrero Rocher at Christmas, so you might choose to leave it in a drawer, and stick with a standard cabled mouse.

Laptops come with built-in keyboards, of course, but there's no reason why you can't use an external keyboard if it makes life easier or more comfortable – or indeed if the built-in keyboard has developed a fault. The exact same rules apply as with using such a keyboard on a desktop PC.

### Keyboard design

Apple's designers introduced a new style of keyboard around a decade ago that's best described as the Scrabble tile keyboard. In the US they call it the Chiclet keyboard because each key looks like a square of Chiclet chewing gum.

Aside from looking sleeker, the keys on these keyboards

have shorter travel distances, so hitting them requires less force than with older designs. This allows you to type with a lighter touch and therefore with less effort and stress on joints – at least in theory.

The traditional style of computer keyboard design used for decades, where each key protrudes from the keyboard and has a more satisfying travel distance, is becoming increasingly rare. In fact you'll struggle to get a laptop that features anything but Scrabble-style keys, although standalone PC keyboards in this style can still be found from certain manufacturers (Kensington is worth a mention).

Luckily for fans of such keyboards, generic no-brand models can be had for bargain prices at sites like eBay because they're considered fusty and undesirable.

Other things to watch out for in the design of keyboards are odd-shaped backspace, enter, shift and other non-alphanumeric keys.

Why is this important? Well, as just one example, most of us are used to backspace keys at the top right of the

Continued overleaf ►

keyboard that are large enough to hit without requiring much accuracy. However, some keyboard designers shrink them down to the size of a standard key, and the result can be intensely frustrating when you hit the equals key by accident every time you want to delete.

On a PC keyboard the cluster of keys to the right of the main keyboard are known as the 'home' keys (there's a potential puzzler for a pub quiz). A number of these are useful for writers.

■ The Page Up/Page Down (sometimes PgUp/PgDn) keys let you jump up or down a screenful of your document at

check any keyboard you buy to ensure these are not only a reasonable size but also that they're where you'd expect them to be – if they're even shifted a few millimetres left or right, you can end up hitting the wrong one.

Macs feature a different set of modifier keys – Ctrl, Alt and Cmd – and this design has been carried across to Bluetooth keyboards intended for use with tablet computers. When such keyboards are used on a Windows or Android computer their functions are swapped in for Ctrl, Alt and Windows. They're just not labelled as such.

Even if you're a touch typist it can all get very confusing. My advice is to buy a PC keyboard for a PC or Android tablet, and a Mac keyboard for Apple hardware.

### The gold standard

Modern keyboards use membrane technology, in which two pieces of conductive plastic touch to register each key press. Back in the 1970s and '80s, computer keyboards used microswitches. Every single key had its own switch.

Switched or mechanical keyboards, as they're known, are much more sturdy than modern keyboards. In fact, some people are still using keyboards from this era. They refuse to die no matter how harshly they're treated. For those who learned to type on typewriters, and who have a heavy touch that can wear out standard keyboards, switched keyboards can be a godsend. They're considered to have a much more positive and responsive feel too, in that there's little ambiguity as to whether a key has been depressed. People who set world records for typing speeds typically do so on switched keyboards.

Alas, there are some drawbacks. They're very noisy, with a clack-clack sound that is guaranteed to annoy anybody in the same room



### Win a top quality keyboard worth £60

We have a G80-3000 keyboard to give away to one lucky *Writers' Forum* reader, courtesy of Cherry ([www.cherry.co.uk](http://www.cherry.co.uk)). It's compatible with both PCs and Macs. To enter, create a typing exercise like 'The quick brown fox...' that uses all the letters of the alphabet. You can use letters more than once, but points will be awarded for brevity, humour and originality. Answers by 22 October 2015 to [tech@writers-forum.com](mailto:tech@writers-forum.com), please, and we'll announce the winner in the Newsfront pages.

as you. Additionally, because they're rarer than membrane keyboards they tend to be expensive – not ridiculously so, but it can be hard paying £60 for a switched keyboard when you can get cheap membrane PC keyboards for a fiver via eBay.

Finally, if you're used to membrane keyboards – especially Scrabble-style ones – using a switched keyboard takes a little getting used to because your fingers have to strengthen. Yes, finger fatigue is a real thing.

Cherry ([www.cherry.co.uk](http://www.cherry.co.uk)) is undoubtedly the market leader for switched keyboards. It produces a range of switch types for use across a range of keyboards. Each is defined by its 'action' – the feel and travel distance of each key – plus the degree of force required to activate each key (measured in centi-Newtons).

If you're the kind of typist who makes the desk shake on each keystroke then you'll certainly find a model that can cope, but there's something for just about any conscientious typist.

I tried one of their G80 models (<http://goo.gl/9xrK97>) and it was a revelation, with my typing speed increasing

dramatically and an overall more satisfying experience.

### Ergonomic keyboards

Just a quick word about ergonomic keyboards – those that move the keys into positions that are supposedly more accessible for your fingers and hands while at rest.

If you can get used to them then they may well bring benefits but adjusting to them can be literally painful. Can you afford to spend a few weeks typing extremely slowly?

It's perhaps because of this that such keyboards are increasingly hard to find. But if you suffer from any typing-related complaint then exploring the use of keyboards such as the Maltron Ergonomic might be worthwhile – see [www.maltron.com](http://www.maltron.com).

• Keir Thomas has been writing about computers for two decades. A bestselling Kindle author, his second novel *The Second Coming of Diamond Head Crater* is available as an ebook through the Amazon, iBooks and Nook stores



If you're the kind of typist who makes the desk shake, consider a switched keyboard

a time, for example.

■ The Insert key switches editing mode so that the cursor will overtype letters where it's positioned, rather than push the text out of the way, as usually happens.

■ The Home key will take you to the start of a document – or to the start of a paragraph, depending on which word processor you're using.

■ The End key takes you to the end of a document, or to the end of the paragraph.

Multimedia keys aren't of any use to writers – unless you like to play music while you work, of course!

### Modifier keys

The keys at the left and right of the spacebar – Ctrl, Alt and the Windows key – also have a name: modifier keys. Again,



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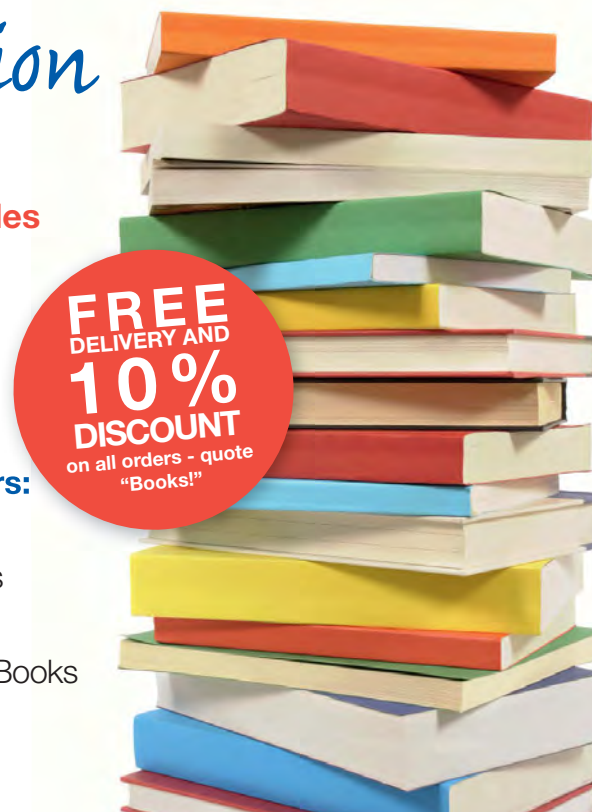
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# THE MAGAZINE SCENE

**Adam Carpenter** gives a round-up of launches, trends and other magazine news

## Quirky ideas about London

Now in its eleventh year, *Londonist* is a what's on guide to the capital that comedian Frank Skinner has described as being 'for the thinking person'. The website has a steady stream of freelance contributors so here are a few tips to help you get your pitch right.

■ Although the site carries news, reviews and listings, it also celebrates the quirks and eccentricities of the city. Memorable posts include a medieval tube map and translating London place names into emojis. Think BuzzFeed meets *Time Out*.

■ News stories usually focus on topics that have city-wide impact, such as how the housing crisis is affecting Londoners or who's going to be the next Mayor of London and what this might mean for those who live and work there. That said, lighter news stories are welcome. The site's editor-in-chief James Drury says: 'We do like it quirky – especially if it tickles our rather dark and sometimes puerile sense of humour.'

■ Look for hidden London, not the obvious haunts. James says *Londonist* readers are curious and want to go beyond the everyday. 'They want unusual stories, authentic recommendations and new experiences of the capital,' he says.

**Visit:** [www.londonist.com](http://www.londonist.com)

## Men need more help

AskMenUK is part of a global network of websites that aim to help the male population become better men. Recently its video and active living editor Matt Chappell revealed the key ingredients of the ideas that become features.

■ Good, useful advice is the key ingredient. Think what the reader can take away from what you have written. 'It might be tips on how to improve his mobility in his workouts or advice on how to negotiate a higher salary,' says Matt.

■ Fun, newsy stories to help the reader keep up with the day's trending conversations – but be quick with your ideas here.

■ Think global: the readers of the site like the sense of sharing and community across the world. And it means you will get your work seen in other territories. 'The sharing of content is encouraged and happens daily,' says Matt. 'We can cherry-pick the best content from our international editors.'

**Visit:** [uk.askmen.com](http://uk.askmen.com)



Londonist recently asked readers to share the weirdest things they'd seen carried on the Tube

Photo Annie Mole

## MARKET NEWS

■ If you have experience of sampling alcoholic spirits in places around the world, you might have an idea worth mentioning to a new website, [worldsbestspirits.com](http://worldsbestspirits.com). Co-founded by drinks journalist and broadcaster Joel Harrison, the site will give readers a taste of flavours across the globe. So if you have drunk a local spirit – whether it be gin, rum, vodka, whatever – you should be better placed to offer a unique take on it and give a colourful and engaging back story than a PR could. Joel says the site's readers will be 'curious and want to be entertained and educated, but not patronised in any way'. Contact him on Twitter @worldofspirits.

■ Though national magazine sales are down by an average of 5.3 per cent, according to last month's industry-used ABC figures, a study by the National Readership Survey suggests 94 per cent of UK adults engage with a print or online publication every month. Titles who bucked the trend (and may have money for freelances) include *Elle*, *Women's Health* and, most impressive of all, *Forever Sports*, which registered a yearly increase of 45.4 per cent, making it the fourth bestselling men's magazine in that period.



## INSIDE VIEW

### Woman Alive

**Woman Alive** is the UK's only magazine aimed specifically at Christian women and seeks to 'inspire, encourage and resource women in their faith'. It does so in a wide variety of ways and there is ample scope for writers to pitch ideas. Here's an idea of what might be welcome...



#### Role models

Inspirational stories of women who have changed or shaped their world in some way and are living life to the full, with a Christian ideal at its heart. Such women would make brilliant interviews and also might impart advice on how others can follow their lead.

#### News focus

Keep an eye on news and events in the world and look for an interesting Christian viewpoint on current topics. Perhaps you might have one of your own that would make a good think piece.

#### Modern relationships

Banish the thought that you are speaking to an older audience, nor should you think that they stick to the sanctity of marriage, no matter what. The average age of the *Woman Alive* readership falls between 35 and 50 and although around half are married, almost 10 per cent are divorced or separated. Relationship stories are sought and ones where a person's faith has been tested are likely to be the most compelling.

#### Biblically accurate

Remember readers have a deep knowledge and understanding of the Bible, so if you are referring to it, make sure you do so correctly. Any case studies of Christians who have lived out their faith, such as by following the rule of St Benedict, will make interesting features.

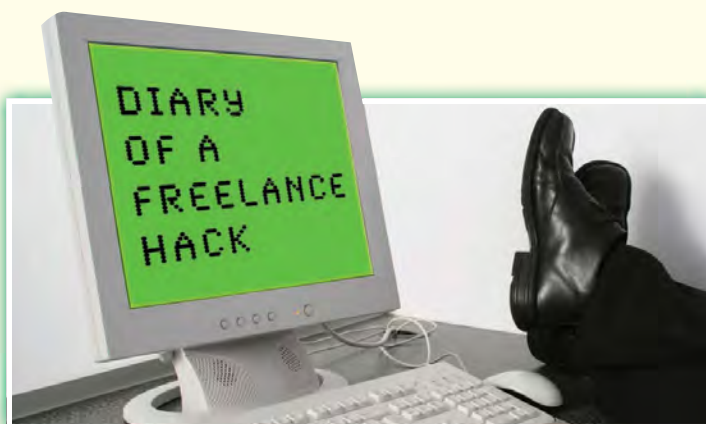
#### The usual – with a slant

Topics more associated with women's magazines are also covered but with a Christian slant. Think stories and advice pieces on managing your money, living simply, shopping ethically. And don't forget the importance of Christmas, Easter and other dates on the Christian calendar – make sure you pitch stories around these dates well in advance.

**Fees:** These range from £70 for a page (750-900 words) and £125 for a three page article (1500-1600 words).

**Recent articles:** *Drive away doubt – ways to boost your faith when it wavers*; *Real Life – I was abandoned in a psychiatric hospital for 15 years*; *Can a single woman adopt a child?*

**Website:** [www.womanalive.co.uk](http://www.womanalive.co.uk)



## BREAKING THROUGH

Have you ever seen the inside of a mouse's house? It's laid out as a series of little rooms linked by tunnels. I had an aerial view of one when I prised the roof off my shed and found a family of the furry fiends had carved their nest into the insulation. The mice had long since departed, as had another family that had built a high-rise version of the room and tunnel system in the insulation that lined the walls. Also gone were the birds that had left their nest in another section of roof and the bees that had abandoned their honeycomb home in another corner. The only residents left in the crumbling wooden crevices were woodlice, beetles, a couple of frogs and some of the biggest spiders that have ever walked the earth.

Demolishing the shed was a long and tortuous process that took several weekends. It was as big as a double garage and although it looked like it was on the point of collapse, it had actually been put together with an eye to longevity that would have impressed the builders of the pyramids. Here was a shed-maker who hadn't believed in using a nail when he could use three screws. Boy, did I curse him as I hammered and crowbarred to undo his handiwork. There were several sweat-drenched moments when I almost gave up, doubting that a particular joint would ever come apart. But, as is always the way with such things, a bit of leverage in the right place opened a gap that allowed another bit of levering somewhere else and, eventually, the whole structure was reduced to a pile of timber.

Of course, the reason I'm telling you this, is that my physical exertions at the weekend are a good metaphor for what I was mentally doing all week. The importance of persistence in writing can never be stated too often. Not just the effort required to straighten out knotty sentences, but the staying power needed to crack new markets. When you spend all day emailing queries without a response it can be tempting to give up. Persist and you might get a 'Maybe' followed by a 'No' further down the line – another opportunity to give up. Keep levering at that 'Maybe' market, though, and eventually it will give way to a 'Yes'.

The other lesson is that sometimes when you're plugging away at the keyboard and getting nowhere, it can be therapeutic to take a break, pick up a big hammer and go and beat the hell out of a shed.

# Dear Della



Need advice on writing and publishing? Novelist and short story writer **Della Galton** can help



## Do I have to buy the mags I want to write for?

**Q** Our writing group has published an anthology which we wish to enter in a competition. Can you please tell me if the copyright is held jointly or do we each retain it on our own contribution?

*Pauline Barnett, Bramhall  
Crime Writers, Cheshire*

**A** Each writer will own the copyright to their story. Just a word of warning here, do check the rules of the competition. Occasionally they may state that by entering the competition you automatically assign them All Rights. This means that in future they will own the copyright of your stories. This rule crops up from time to time and it doesn't just apply to anthologies, it applies to any work, so do watch out for it. I don't advise writers ever to hand over their copyright without thinking carefully about it.

**Q** **PRIZE LETTER** Do I need to read the magazines I want to write for? It's very expensive to buy them all. Can't I just read the guidelines?

*Gemma Edmund (short story writer), Bournemouth*

**A** No, you have to read them. First of all there's the practical reason that you won't know what they want unless you read them. Guidelines give only very basic information such as word lengths and a rough guide to types of stories. You can find out so much more by reading and immersing yourself in the magazine. Who are the readers? What are their concerns? Find out by reading letter pages, problem pages, and the advertising the magazine carries – advertisers are paying good money to target a particular readership. It's old advice but it bears repeating.

Second, magazines change. Sometimes they have an image that is hard to shake off, even years later. It's amazing how many people tell me they think *Woman's Weekly* is pink and blue and all about

knitting. This is so far removed from the current *Woman's Weekly* persona it's laughable. Don't rely on what you think a magazine might be like from information gleaned in the past. Read current copies.

Third, and to me this is the most important, magazines that carry fiction and writers of fiction are reliant on each other. There were 80-plus women's magazines that took fiction when I started in 1987. In 2000 when I went full time there were 21. Now there are far fewer – perhaps seven that are open to freelance submissions. This is a direct result of loss of readers. Often, as you may have noticed, it's not the whole magazine that goes, just the fiction page.

It would be a tragedy if short story magazines disappeared due to lack of support. I feel so strongly about this. We must buy them. I have subscriptions to two, both fiction, and I buy the others on an ad hoc but very regular basis. They are my livelihood and I, as a customer, am theirs. Please don't ever forget that publishing and writing are businesses that are totally reliant on each other.

**Q** I have begun to despair. Despite hard work my writing has not been published. I try to be thick-skinned but am feeling demotivated. The constraints of time and money mean that I am presently unable to take a writing course. Is it possible to improve my writing by myself and if so how?

*Jennie Gardner, Bath*

**A** I don't know if it helps, but you are not alone. Getting published is hard and always has been. More people are trying to do it than ever. But let's get on to what you can do to improve. This is what I did when I was learning, none of which was costly.

■ Read good books about writing. I recommend *Teach Yourself Creative Writing* by Dianne Doubtfire, updated by Ian

Burton. This was my mainstay when I started. It's very comprehensive.

■ Read *Writers' Forum* – and follow the advice! There are many features that show realistic routes to getting published, along with exercises you should try.

■ Write as much as you can using the techniques you've learned.

■ Get feedback from a friend you trust, or pay for critiques if you enter competitions, or join an online community where members comment on each other's work. You will quickly learn which members are constructive, helpful and knowledgeable.

Finally, don't give up. This is the one piece of advice that every single successful writer I have ever spoken to gives. It comes from me too. Good luck.

**Q** At my U3A creative writing group we did an exercise using book titles. Mine led to a poem using *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. It's now the title of my poem and is used as a refrain: 'Fair stood the wind for France that night.' If it's published, am I infringing copyright?

*Helen Watts, via email*

**A** There is no copyright on titles and the same title can be used over and over again. *Fair Stood the Wind for France* is a novel written by HE Bates (first published in 1944) but Bates took the title from the first line of a poem called *Agincourt* by Michael Drayton (1563–1631). So it would be well out of copyright anyway!

But do avoid series names that constitute trademarks, such as 'Harry Potter', 'Beast Quest', '...for Dummies', and so on. One-off standalone titles are safer territory.

### Win Della's book!

Each month the best question or most helpful letter wins a copy of Della's book *The Short Story Writer's Toolshed*, available from Amazon in paperback and Kindle formats.





# THE WRITERS' IDEA STORE

I'm rabbiting on this month with a quote from a master. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* made such a deep impression on me when I read it at school, I haven't dared go back and reread it since. But this quote that is attributed to him is in a much lighter vein and was obviously in answer to the question that has plagued writers since the dawn of

## Paula Williams on rabbits, reading and real-life crime inspiration

time: 'Where do you get your ideas from?'

'Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them and pretty soon you have a dozen.'

There! I'll bet you didn't realise it was that easy, did you?

Of course, the crucial part of that quote lies in the words 'you learn how to handle them'. I am firmly convinced that the best way to handle your ideas is simply to write and keep on writing.

When I was starting out, if I came across a passage in a book that particularly resonated with me, I would copy it down, one word at a time, in longhand. I still have notebooks containing passages from writers such as Nora Roberts and Peter Lovesey. I wasn't seeking to copy those writers' styles, you understand, but simply to get inside their heads for a while.

And it was a great way to learn. The first book I ever read by Nora Roberts stopped me in my tracks. I can remember thinking: 'Wow! I want to write like that.'

I don't, of course. I write like me and it has taken me several years to find my voice (even if I do still suffer the occasional bout of metaphorical laryngitis). But I wrote my comment down in my journal.

You do keep a journal or diary, don't you? I love to look back through mine and only the other day I found an idea that had languished there for five years and which is now one of my current works in progress and coming along very nicely.

Recently I had a very late night when I stayed up into the small hours to finish a book, knowing full well if I didn't find out how it ended I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway.

But then, when I did finish it, I wished I hadn't because I'd enjoyed it so much.

Don't you love it when a book grabs you like that? The book, *I Let You Go*, is crime writer Clare Mackintosh's debut novel – and what a debut. Some of the twists and turns took my breath away and made for a compelling and very absorbing read.

How did she get the idea? Well, Clare spent 12 years in the police force, including time in CID and as a public order commander. She left in 2011 and now writes full time. Her website is at [www.claremackintosh.com](http://www.claremackintosh.com).

'I began my police training in 1999 and was posted to Oxford in 2000,' she says in the author's note at the end of her book, from which I quote with her permission. 'In December of that year, a nine-year-old boy was killed by joyriders in a stolen car on the Blackbird Leys Estate. It was four years before the inquest ruling of unlawful killing, during which time an extensive police investigation was carried out. The case formed the backdrop to my early years as a police officer and was still generating enquiries when I joined CID, three years later.'

'A substantial award was offered, as well as the promise of immunity from prosecution for the passenger travelling in the car, should they come forward and identify the driver. But despite several arrests, no one was ever charged. The aftermath of this crime made a big impression on me. How could the driver of that Vauxhall Astra live with what they'd done? How could the passengers keep quiet about it? How could the child's mother ever come to terms with such a terrible loss?'

'I was fascinated by the intelligence reports that came in following each anniversary appeal and by the diligence of the police in sifting through every single piece of information in the hope of finding that one missing link.'

'Years later... I experienced first hand how emotion can cloud one's judgement and alter behaviour. Grief and guilt are powerful feelings and I began to wonder how they might affect two women, involved in very different ways in the same incident. The result is *I Let You Go*.'

And what an excellent result it is.

I started with the master. I'm going to finish with him, with a quote from *East of Eden*:

'And now you know you don't have to be perfect. You can be good.'

I like that! If you wait for something to be perfect, you'll wait for ever. But if you settle for good, who knows where it'll take you?

Here's hoping your writing gets better and better and ideas start multiplying like rabbits. As always, you can email me at [ideastore@writers-forum.com](mailto:ideastore@writers-forum.com)

## FICTION SQUARE

Roll a dice to find all the ingredients for your next story

|   | 1st & 2nd roll<br>Characters | 3rd & 4th roll<br>Traits | 5th roll<br>Conflict | 6th roll<br>Location | 7th roll<br>Object |
|---|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | A man called John            | Nervous                  | Temptation           | Traffic jam          | Journal            |
| 2 | Joyrider                     | Perfectionist            | Pursuit              | Church tower         | Rabbit             |
| 3 | Graffiti artist              | Unpleasant               | Rivalry              | Ice rink             | Bloody footprints  |
| 4 | Child                        | Immortal                 | Betrayal             | Sinking ship         | Post box           |
| 5 | Grandparent                  | Fragile                  | Bankruptcy           | Old barn             | White glove        |
| 6 | Lawyer                       | Over-careful             | Sacrifice            | Ballroom             | Mirror             |



As sponsor of the local Purbeck Literary Festival, we publish the results of this year's contest and launch the 2016 short story prize

## 2016 STORY PRIZE NOW OPEN!

The 2016 contest is now open and this year's judges will be festival organiser Lyn McCulloch, editor Carl Styants and writer Della Galton. The theme is 'Heroes' and the word count is 950-1050 words.

The prize is £100 cash and a personalised hand-bound notebook from local firm DJ Bookbinders. The winner will be invited to receive his or her prize from headlining author Jill Mansell at her literary brunch at the Grand Hotel in Swanage on Tuesday 23 February. The prize includes a night for two at the hotel with breakfast and up to £50 travel expenses. The deadline for entries is 14 December 2016 and the winner will be announced on 14 January 2016. Entry is £3.50. To enter, please visit [purbeckliteraryfestival.info](http://purbeckliteraryfestival.info)

## Inspiring

The next Purbeck Literary Festival runs from 14 to 27 February 2016 and features creative workshops, poetry, performances, art exhibitions and events featuring the works of TE Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, Enid Blyton and Percy F Westerman, who all lived or worked in Purbeck, as well as contemporary authors, many of whom have been influenced by the local landscape. It's a chance to visit this stunning area and be inspired too. For more information, visit [purbeckliteraryfestival.info](http://purbeckliteraryfestival.info)



TE Lawrence's home, Clouds Hill



The Famous Five had fun around Corfe Castle



Durdle Door has inspired writers through the ages



Brunch with Jill Mansell at the Grand Hotel

The theme was 'A picture paints a thousand words' and the task was to write a short story inspired by the prize – a limited-edition print by Purbeck artist Ben Spurling, entitled *Early Morning, Swanage Beach*. Bestselling author Carole

Matthews picked the winner from a shortlist drawn up by festival organiser Lyn McCulloch and *Writers' Forum* editor Carl Styants.

First prize went to Marianne Ashurst from Wimborne, who received her prize at Carole's literary lunch at the Grand Hotel in Swanage. Carole found it difficult to choose between three of the stories on the shortlist, and decided to award a copy of her latest book in hardback to all three. The runners-up, Anne Peterson and Gillian Bryant, were also invited to meet Carole and had a great time at the festival.

## First prize

### Fingers Crossed Marianne Ashurst

The snapshot is in black and white but I so clearly see the colours of that late summer afternoon.

From the grass-jewelled headland of amethyst-shadowed chalk cliffs, across a sea that for once, really was a child's paintbox colour, to where we sat on sands sparkling in the heat, the day had been filled with light and love. We all need love to keep us going, especially when it's hard to find.

'I've never seen that photograph before.' My grandson leans over me. He has come to help me pack up. My life is being sorted into boxes. I can no longer manage on my own, arthritis and a weakening heart have seen to that.

I stroke a finger gently across the family gathered on the beach, brush off imagined dust.

'When was it taken?' he continues.

I turn it over. *Swanage*, it reads, *15th August 1939*.

It was Colin's twenty-first birthday. The remains of a celebratory picnic lie strewn across a cloth on the sand. Mother sits behind it with all four of us around her. Colin on her left, an arm around her thin shoulders. On her right, seventeen-year-old Margaret, her rather daring, strapless dress adding a touch of glamour. Behind her I stand with my sister Brenda. I'm wearing a long sleeved cardigan despite the heat. Between Brenda and myself is her fiancé Bill, hands behind his back. Bill, who never married Brenda. Who never married anyone in fact.

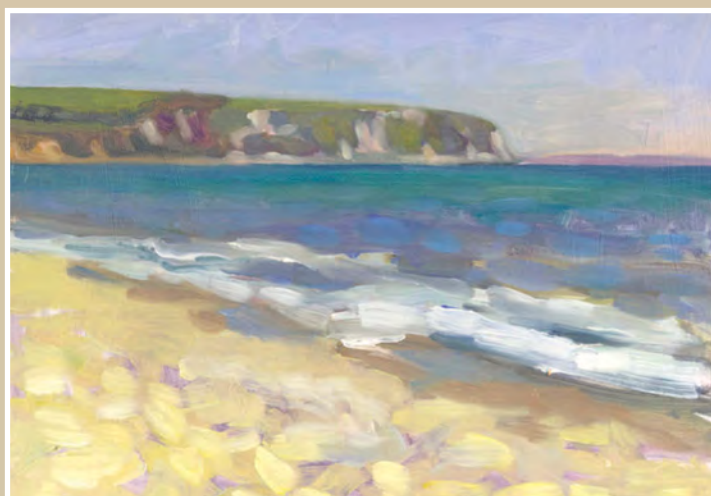
I'm holding my son, a bonny, curly haired toddler and the reason for my marriage. Nobody believed he was born early. My husband isn't there; he's behind the lens of his new Kodak. Darkness may be casting shadows over Europe but here we smile in the sunshine.

'That must be Great Uncle Colin.' My grandson points at the



# PURBECK LITERARY FESTIVAL

## SHORT STORY PRIZE



*Early Morning, Swanage Beach* by Ben Spurling

fair-haired young man. 'Mum has a picture of him in uniform. He looks so young.'

'Old enough to die for his country before the year was out.' I sigh.

'Who's that?' He peers at Margaret.

I wonder what to say about the sister who was written out of our family story. It's why this picture was hidden from view. Nowadays, no one would bat an eyelid at an unmarried teenage mother who refused to name the father and insisted she would keep the baby. It was too much for Dad though. As a local JP and churchwarden he said he couldn't stand the gossip. There'd been enough talk about me. Two daughters causing a scandal and he couldn't hold his head up. He ordered her out and she went. How do I explain the anguish of a lifetime never knowing where your baby sister might be?

'Oh, she's just a family friend,' I say, crossing my fingers.

I still do it. A habit formed in a long ago childhood. A talisman against lies or wrongdoing. A four-year-old me crossing her fingers as she creeps into the larder for the last piece of cake. A schoolgirl with digits entwined, copying the answers from her friend's book. It didn't always work. I had them tightly twisted together that afternoon in the woods when I decided to find out what all the fuss was about and gave my virginity to a boy I'd met only twice.

'And that must be my great-grandmother. She looks so happy.'

'She was about your age when that picture was taken,' I tell him. He is no longer in the first flush of youth. 'Only forty-eight when she died.'

I catch his momentary shudder. Once you turn forty, mortality

begins to press at your heels.

My poor mother, pleased to die, wracked by cancer and heartbroken with the loss of Colin and Margaret.

'And there you are, Gran. Bit of a looker, weren't you? Cardigan looks out of place, though. It seems like a hot day.'

'I've always felt the cold.' Fingers crossed again. Well, I can't tell him how difficult it was to try and keep the bruises hidden. I'm sure Mum knew how Andrew treated me but that sort of thing wasn't talked about. I used to think it wasn't really his fault. He'd found himself trapped as surely as I had and, working his way up in the bank, divorce was out of the question.

'I'm holding your Uncle John.' I keep talking. 'Of course, your mother wasn't born then.'

'And the man next to Brenda is...?'

'Bill,' I reply. 'Her fiancé before she met Alan. He broke their engagement when he found he loved someone else but she soon got over it.'

He's lost interest now and gets up to move some more boxes to the door.

'I'll put these in the charity shop pile shall I, Gran? Then I'll fill the car with the pile for the tip.'

I can't help it, a tear slides down. Ninety-three years are being sorted into piles. The smallest pile is going with me into Sunnyside View. Ninety-three years of trying to do your duty and crossing your fingers when you fail.

'It's a shame my grandfather isn't in the picture too. No delayed action on cameras in those days, eh?'

Oh, but he is there. Shall I tell the family secrets? No, they'll die with me but I wish I could let him know how much I loved his grandfather.

I look back to the family smiling on the beach and feel again warmth flood through me from Bill's hand nestling in the small of my back.

A perfect Dorset summer afternoon, a happy family on the beach. I remember the pain and suffering there was to come, but my heart is healed again. I don't fear the future now; I'm lit once more with colour and love. We all need love to keep us going, especially when it's hard to find.

I cross my fingers and smile.



**About the author** Marianne writes: 'I was born and brought up in Blackpool – which accounts for my love of bright lights and all things glittery! I moved to Wimborne with my family over 25 years ago and find the landscape of my adoptive county a constant source of inspiration. I retired recently to enjoy seeing more of my granddaughters and to have time to devote to writing.'



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**Hannah Evans, Winchester** "I've been published in The Guardian and Good Life earning £400. And now I've got my first book published by Bloomsbury called MOB Rule: Lessons Learned by a Mother of Boys. The Writers Bureau course provided me with structure, stopped my procrastination but most importantly it provided the impetus to try something different."

**Kris Roberts, Somerset** "When I first saw my words in print it was life changing. Someone else had read my work, believed in it, paid for it, and put it out there for others to see. As more articles made it to press, my confidence grew and I found I wanted to inject some of myself into my writing. At the time of writing this I have received £1,197 for my work."



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# Tales of my GURU

by Hugh Scott

## The mystery mentor lists some problems that beginners should avoid

Apricot Flan was the instigator of my new writers' circle. She was a person, and not a pudding. She was one of those females who had learned, probably in her high chair, that a certain smile could melt a chap's interior and persuade him into anything.

So here we were, me and Jim Grunt with the other traitors who had deserted the writers' circle previously, all waiting to feed at my bottle, so to speak.

I noticed one man smiling quietly. I shrank an eye at him, because I didn't know him.

I looked at the traitors. I couldn't think what to say.

'It's nice to see you all back,' said the man.

'It's nice to see you all back,' I said; and shoulders relaxed.

'It's not my job to tell you how to write,' said the man pleasantly.

'It's not my job,' I said, just as pleasantly, 'to tell you how to write...'

'And certainly I cannot tell you what to think,' he said humbly. And I heard myself repeating this, too. And I realised that this man was unreal; that he was, in fact, my Guru, a spirit as packed with literary wisdom as an apple-skin is packed with apple, and he was here to help. My shoulders relaxed too.

Apricot Flan was gazing at me adoringly, and my Guru's words continued in my head. I knew that only I could hear him; I smiled at Apricot Flan.

'Every beginner,' we said tactfully (having read her first-ever poem which read like a first-ever poem), 'is starting on a journey.' I glanced at the traitors who assumed that they were beyond being beginners, and they shuffled comfortably.

'There may be nothing wrong with your first poem, but it is, nevertheless, the beginning of your journey. As you continue, your writing will change. You will look back and see that there really was nothing wrong with your first poem –' an inspired phrase arrived on my tongue – 'just as there is nothing wrong with a baby.'

Apricot Flan jumped in her seat. 'They both have to mature!'

I smiled widely; and I saw that the writing group were not traitors, but ordinary folk struggling to write and



a bit scared of not succeeding.

'Tell us some of the difficulties!' cried Mrs Halburton-Smythe; and I was startled, because she always scorned advice.

Perhaps something in her had changed. Perhaps something in me had changed. I noticed that my Guru had retreated to the back of the room where tea and buns were laid out, and I wondered if he was still inspiring my talk.

'Remember this,' I said, not knowing what I was going to say, 'you don't have to show anybody your work. You can learn to write privately. You can discover for yourself how other writers get their effects –' I listened to myself with interest – 'though joining a writers' circle does intimate that you are happy to consider advice.'

'We are,' murmured Mrs Halburton-Smythe, and heads nodded.

'Please, please tell us things to avoid,' said Apricot Flan, 'so that we can get on with really good writing!' And more heads nodded.

I remembered my own problems as a beginner, and mentioned sticking to the point.

'It's so easy,' I said, 'to get led astray by your imagination, and find that you've written pages of conversation that are just that – pages of conversation, none of which is relevant to your story. I remember putting in comments – my opinion about things – which were pointless because I wasn't a character in the story. And descriptions!' I shook my head at my **erstwhile** descriptions of countryside, or dramatic townscapes. 'Descriptions should come from your characters' observations, not yours, so that they are relevant to what happens.'

'And!' I cried, remembering more horrors, 'pouring words on to the page while forgetting simple things like decent grammar, and succinctness, and originality of expression! The hordes of words that rushed on to my pages were

like ants in a panic! Enthusiasm needs the reins of restraint – which means, keeping in mind that your story has a point, and is not a wild place where your words can scatter aimlessly.' I paused.

'I thought you were going to say ants in your pants,' giggled Apricot.

'Sorry?' I didn't know what she was talking about.

'Sorry,' she whispered.

'What?'

'Sorry.'

I remembered another problem. 'And don't think that you need a special place for writing. You can write on a bus, or in a coffee shop –'

'JK Rowling!' squealed Apricot. Apricot Flan was becoming less attractive.

'– or in the bath. And write about what you know!' I cried. 'If you want to write about something you know nothing about, find out! Ask somebody who does know! And make your story long enough! No publisher has a use for a 30,000-word novel, or a story that's so short that nothing happens. I've seen this. I have!'

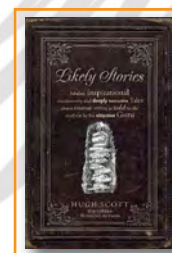
'Tea! Tea and buns are essential for writers! I saw tea and buns at the back of the room!' And I rushed to the back of the room, but was nudged aside by my Guru, then trampled to the floor by my writers' group. The traitors.

### Use it or lose it

'Erstwhile' has an old-fashioned ring; like a church bell clanging to celebrate 500 years of annoying people. It is an adverb meaning 'formerly' and also an adjective meaning 'former'. Here is how to use it:

*'My erstwhile wife,' complained the clutterbuck, 'ran off with every stick of furniture that were erstwhile mine.'*

'Erstwhile mine' is ugly and should be avoided.



The early adventures of me and my Guru are published in a super-beautiful hardback, *Likely Stories*, published by How To Books for less than a tenner – that's the price of five coffees. Treat yourself.

# Writers' FORUM

## Achievement Chart

Pin up this calendar to plan  
and record your writing work  
and then analyse your progress  
at the end of the month

## October 201

- Topics or ideas researched .....
- .....
- No of words of my book I will write each day/week .....
- .....
- Stories written/submitted .....
- .....
- Poems written/submitted .....
- .....
- Feature ideas sent out .....
- .....
- Agents approached .....
- .....
- Courses/workshops/events attended .....
- .....
- New things tried .....
- .....
- .....
- Books read .....
- .....
- Writing-related income and expenditure .....
- .....
- ..... Total earned: ..... Total spent: .....
- .....
- Sum up your writing month in one word .....

| Mon   | Tue  |
|---|--|
| 29  | 30   |
| Michael Morpurgo (1943)<br>Peter Ackroyd (1949)<br>Clive Barker (1952)  | Thor Heyerdahl (1914)<br>Melvyn Bragg (1939)                                 |
| 5   | 6  |
| Ann Petry (1908)<br>Alice Chetwynd Ley (1913)                           | Mary Kingsley (1862)<br>Conrad Richter (1890)<br>Rosemary Anne Sisson (1923) |
| 12  | 13   |
| John le Carré (1931)<br>Philip Pullman (1946)<br>Tracy Chevalier (1962) | Thomas Hughes (1822)<br>Kate Mosse (1961)<br>Monica Ali (1967)               |
| 19  | 20   |
| John Arden (1930)<br>Andrew Motion (1952)                               | Dylan Thomas (1914)<br>Sylvia Plath (1932)                                   |
| 26  | 27   |



art

5



I should look through the papers and say, “Where’s the most dangerous place to go,” because it always makes a good story

Reporter Clare Hollingworth, who scooped the outbreak of the Second World War, interviewed just before her 100th birthday on 10 October 2011

Wed

Thu

Fri

Sat

Sun

John Hegley (1953)  
Harry Hill (1964)

Graham Greene (1904)  
Jan Morris (1926)  
Diana Hendry (1941)

James Herriot (1916)  
Gore Vidal (1925)

Edward Stratemeyer (1862)  
Jackie Collins (1937)  
Anne Rice (1941)

31

1

2

3

4

Robert Westall (1929)  
Thomas Keneally (1935)  
Clive James (1939)

Frank Herbert (1920)  
Blake Morrison (1950)

John Lennon (1940)  
Guillermo del Toro (1964)  
PJ Harvey (1969)

Clare Hollingworth (1911)  
James Clavell (1921)  
Ed Wood (1924)  
Harold Pinter (1930)  
Anne Mather (1946)  
Nora Roberts (1950)

T Llew Jones (1915)  
Elmore Leonard (1925)  
Anne Enright (1962)

7

8

9

10

11

Katherine Mansfield (1888)  
EE Cummings (1894)

PG Wodehouse (1881)  
CP Snow (1905)  
Mario Puzo (1920)  
Ed McBain (1926)

Noah Webster (1758)  
Oscar Wilde (1854)  
Günter Grass (1927)

Elinor Glyn (1864)  
Arthur Miller (1915)

Thomas Love Peacock (1785)  
Terry McMillan (1951)

14

15

16

17

18

Samuel Coleridge (1772)  
Ursula K Le Guin (1929)

Doris Lessing (1919)  
Graham Joyce (1954)  
AL Kennedy (1965)

Pierre Larousse (1817)  
Michael Crichton (1942)

Frank Delaney (1942)

Anne Tyler (1941)  
Zadie Smith (1975)

21

Writers' Forum  
#169 on sale

22

23

24

25

Evelyn Waugh (1903)  
Anne Perry (1938)

Henry Green (1905)  
Lee Child (1954)

Richard Sheridan (1751)

John Keats (1795)  
Dick Francis (1920)

28

29

30

31

1

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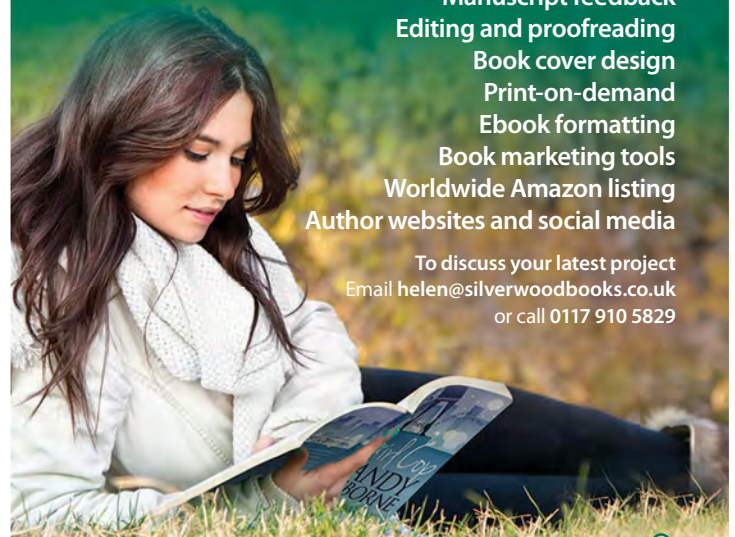
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# Writers' FORUM

## *fiction* competition

Congratulations to this month's winners, Kieran Marsh, Anne Walsh Donnelly and Haydn Cavanagh. Do you have a short story that could impress our head judge Lorraine Mace? Any subject, any style is welcome. Turn to the rules and entry form on page 39.

**FIRST PRIZE £300**

## Death is the Sound of Distant Thunder

Kieran Marsh

*Contains strong language*

*Ladysmith, Natal, October 1899*

**T**hey lay like children in the tent, glorying in the closeness of each other. The smells, the touches, lingering fingers, the softness of skin; it was like their first time. They were a year married, but a month apart as they had made their separate ways to this fierce cauldron in Africa.

'You... I can't believe you're here,' said Jimmy.

'You hardly missed me, sure what are you talking about?' Maureen wiggled his nose with her finger.

'Every morning without you was a heartache.'

'Is it a poet you are now? Sure, I can't have the lads in the platoon thinking my husband is some sort of nancy boy.'

'God, you're as bad. Can't a man just enjoy his wife?'

'Oh, Jimmy.' She kissed his chest, hungrily. 'You can enjoy what you want of me, because I'm going to enjoy the hell out of you.'

She kissed again and again, driving her face deep into his skin till it hurt. He pulled her against him, twisted her on top, feeling the slightness of her form.

Soldier, warrior, savage. As he rolled with her, she sang songs that were ancient when men first walked in Ireland, the songs that spoke to the spirits of the Daoine Sídh. Slender tendrils touched their bodies, ice cold, fire hot. He was consumed by them, sucked into her world, overwhelmed. She caoined as they danced a step old as the birds, the making of life. Each time she sang that weirdling song, and it pulled them both scattering through consciousness on to some divine plane. Twisting, writhing, touching spaces that lived only in the point where their souls met. Sweat, spit, sinew and muscle.

He lay exhausted, all good gone from him. She took from her travel bag two totems wrapped in leather, and tied them around his saturated neck. The first was a Crom Cruach, all bitter and tinny and ringing with ancient tones, the second a cross of silver,



new blessed by the Bishop, happy on its bed beside the pagan relic.

'That my song may go with you,' she whispered, then lay beside him, and they slept.

He woke with a start, she with a scream. She twisted feverishly, raving, shouting stupid foreign words to some hidden ear. He held her but she slapped at him, writhed and rose up... then collapsed, curled in on herself.

'What is it, what's wrong, my love?'

'Oh, Jimmy...'

She was crying, broad tears that chilled him.

'Maureen, what is it, my love?' He tried to pull her over to him, to cuddle her, but she was intransigent.

'Oh, my heart,' she whispered. 'The world, sure isn't it changing?'

'Of course it is, my sweet. Aren't we halfway to hell in this God-forsaken country?'

'No, Jimmy, the whole world. Something... something is coming. It's... I can't see it, but it's awful. Oh, Jesus, no...'

Continued overleaf 

► *Death is the Sound of Distant Thunder continued*

Maureen's people spoke to the land, listened to its spirit, her unholy song waking its voice. He knew that, knew she was only a vessel into which the manifestation of the world poured, but he did not understand. He spooned around her and held her.

The evening bugle sounded eventually, so that he had half an hour till he had to report in. His uniform was washed and ironed but he had not eaten.

'Will you make me my tea?' he asked gently as he dressed, but she did not respond. He drank cold tea from the pot she had made earlier, and ate two rounds of bread with no butter.

He kissed her again when he was done.

'Will you not come to see me out?' he said, both angry and desperately sad.

'It will all change!' she gasped.

He left, feeling empty despite the passion.

Outside the technicolor tent, the world was grey. Grey clay that turned to sticky grey mud in the twice a day thunderstorms, only to be baked back to clay under the unforgiving Natal sun. Kahki uniforms turned dun by the dust, all hint of pomp or rank concealed in the grimness of modern war. Darkening sky as the sun plunged below the horizon awfully quickly; close to the equator, Drummond had said. They had joined up together and had quickly become buddies, but Drummond had been in the merchant navy, knew something of the world, and had no fear of the fighting to come.

Jimmy was less ready. True, the army had taught him to cope with anything: put one foot in front of the other and, when the sergeant screams, you obey. No need to think, no reason for worry; just do as you're told and you'll be OK.

This was different though. A hundred thousand Boers, by some accounts, were riding towards them with Mauser rifles in their hands and hatred in their hearts. For the first time, Jimmy would face the reality of fighting. As he stopped to light a cigarette, his hand was shaking; he had to hold his wrist with the other hand to steady it.

The platoon were all getting back from their furlough, an afternoon's ease before the dread of war, half of them staggering, drunk. They slipped into their tents quickly, but then Fusilier O'Reilly, a deep throated tenor, began a round of *The Wearing of the Green*, and the troops, warmed by whatever wretched distillation they had managed to buy, could not help themselves but join in. In moments, the whole camp was roaring.

Two minutes later they were on the parade ground in their long-johns, Sergeant Tully screaming. It got cold fast once the sun went down. They were left standing for twenty minutes, until they were all shivering.

Lieutenant Trunch marched on to the parade ground. His khaki fatigues ironed to a crisp crease, his broad moustache waxed as was the habit among the English officers.

'Sergeant Tully, report please.'

'Sir, it has come to my attention that a number of men of this unit have been drinking, sir.' Tully was a big man from Offaly, good in a rumble, but he could turn on you without a qualm.

'Drinking?' Trunch raised his eyebrows in surprise, a little game to prefix the brutality they knew would soon come. 'Remind me, Sergeant, did I not express directly this morning that drinking was forbidden?'

'Indeed you did, sir.'

'And why?'

'We march to war tomorrow, sir.'

'To war!' Trunch walked slowly across the platoon rank. 'To war.

I give you slimy worms a rest before your first ever turn to serve Her Majesty in the manner to which you have been trained, and you repay me by directly disobeying a clear order. You fucking paddies. Fucking drunken useless paddies. Jesus,' he looked to the heavens, 'why have you cursed me with this?'

He walked quickly back along the file, tapping every fifth man on the shoulder, 'that one, that one, that one...' Eight in all, Jimmy was the last.

'Sergeant, have each of those men whipped, ten lashes, and dock every man in One Platoon a week's pay. The rest of you, crawl back to your tents and pray God you die tomorrow, 'cause that's all you're fucking good for.'

Thirty men dropped to hands and knees and crawled away, eight stood stoically awaiting punishment, innocent and guilty alike. The pain was fierce, but the waiting was worse. Even Drummond cried out when his turn came, while Jimmy stood cold and shaking and alone.

The war began, as so many things do, with a bang. An innocent explosion in the midst of the troops that blew the head off an artillery mule. The platoon had been shipped out by cattle wagon before dawn, ten miles north to the mining town of Glencoe where the rest of the army was gathered. There had been sightings of riders on distant hills that had driven the camp into a state of some anxiety. Nobody knew if the Boers had the heart for an attack or if the sight of the army ready for war would scatter them, or might they try to slip past towards Ladysmith. When the mule died, the speculation was over.

Military organisation kicked in. Sergeants shouted, officers blew whistles, drummers rattled out a rhythm for the units to form up. The Boers had managed to haul some small guns onto a nearby hilltop, though they were too few and small to be decisive and the English howitzers were soon in play.

The order of battle: first, the artillery, pound the blighters back to hell. Then, the infantry marching in close-order, boots pounding, scare the holy terror out of them and then, as they turn yellow and run for their mothers, the cavalry canter through and mow them down like a field of nettles. Talana hill was to be the battle ground, three hundred feet high and flat topped, two miles from Glencoe.

The rhythm of the marching was a blessed relief from listening to the smacks of the artillery, British guns thumping, Boer shells cracking death anywhere at any moment. It helped not to think about what was ahead, to simply let the muscle memory from endless hours of drilling guide their feet.

The rain greeted them with its cooling touch, heavy enough that Jimmy felt it trickling like a salve down the still aggressive abrasions on his back. The track became mud, then a thick ooze that you had to pull your feet out of as the troops in front pounded it.

There was a farm at the foot of the hill with a walled orange grove. The Royal Dublin Fusiliers were marched in and directed to form very-close-order at the wall. Suddenly from above, from out of the grey wet hillside, the sleeting rain, came a hideous storm of rifle fire. They could not see their attackers, could only see the grass and mud splatting up as the bullets thwacked into the ground. Jimmy ran for the shelter of the wall.

'Form up,' shouted Tully. 'Come on, you bastards.' He started pulling at men, dragging them out of the lee of the wall, towards a gate that led on to the slope. Fusilier Cummins was hit, went down foaming.

'Medic!'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' said Jimmy. 'Did you see that? The poor fucker.'

'Christ, look what's coming now,' said Drummond, pointing to a half dozen men on horses, approaching. There was an ensign with



a pennant. 'It's only the fucking general.'

They rode up to the wall, ignoring the enfilade.

'Who's in charge here?' shouted the general.

'That's me, sir,' said Trunch.

'Why aren't you up the hill? My plan says you should be up the hill.'

'Just forming up, sir.'

Tully was still trying to pull men to their feet. Even Three Platoon, next to them, hardened combat veterans all, were showing no enthusiasm for the ascent.

'Hell and damn it,' said the general. 'You want something done...'

The general climbed off his horse and drew his sword.

'Right, let's get this fucking done with.'

He ran through the gate, waving the sword and screaming. Three Platoon found their battlefield legs and followed, howling.

Trunch blew his whistle.

'Get up that hill, you fuckers.'

One Platoon, all first timers, did not move, each waiting on the others to start.

'Right,' said Trunch. He pulled out his service revolver, put it to the head of Fusilier Murphy and pulled the trigger. Murphy went down like a sack of spuds, half the platoon were splattered with bits of him.

'Who's fucking next?'

As Trunch waved the gun around, they scrambled to their feet and through the gate.

Up the hill, running. Spang. Bullets whirring. Men everywhere, running, falling.

They passed the general coming down, clutching painfully at where black stains spread across the khaki on his belly. 'Carry on, men.'

The clay was slippery; Jimmy lost his footing in the cut up sludge. He stood back up, black with mud.

Above him, somebody fell, yelling: 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.' A body barrelled down the hill past him. Gouts of hot blood sprayed Jimmy's face. Wetness dripped into his eyes. He wiped, smeared blood and rain.

From somewhere, the wail of a piper, the ancient music of war. Soldier, warrior, savage. As he ran, the rhythm twisted him. Writhing in time, foaming with the blood lust. Kill them, kill the fuckers. Maureen curled up. Oh, Christ and His Holy Mother, no!

Thud, thud, boot before boot. A hundred thousand years, man before man, woman before woman, while Maureen was singing and he was thrusting. Thud. And the whole world was spinning. Thud. And the Sídhé and Christ Almighty were swinging from the thong around his neck. Thud. And one by one, the seven trumpets of the apocalypse were sounding. Thud. Bullets like metal cables twanging. Thud thud thud.

He ran, uphill, lungs burning, eyes burning. He could not see where he was going. Boots in front. Follow those. Stay low.

Thud. And Maureen, splayed across the world, the great mother, Síle na Gee. Thud.

The ground levelled out. Following boots into trenches.

'Where the fuck are...'

'They're over there,' screamed Tully. 'Fire at will.'

More trenches, the far side of the hill top. Spinning lead. And the shells, the bloody English shells still falling between them. Thunder and lightning, the music of hell, the Devil was loose in the world.

Jimmy dived with the rest. The trench was shallow, hastily dug, water soaked. Thick mud dragged at his boots. Drummond was beside him.

'What about you, Jimmy, head down now.'

Continued overleaf ►

# Writers'FORUM

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|--|-----------------------------|
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| Visa/Mastercard/Maestro (delete) Total £   |                             |
| Card no  |                             |
| Expiry date  | Valid from (if shown)       |
| Issue no (if shown)  | Security no (last 3 digits) |
| Signature  |                             |
| <input type="radio"/> I am happy for my story to be considered for a free fiction workshop and to be featured in <i>Writers' Forum</i> (optional)                |                             |

► *Death is the Sound of Distant Thunder continued*

'This is shit, Drummond.'  
Jimmy fired into the smoke, the empty, soulless enemy.  
'Drummond, have you more ammo?' he yelled.  
'Where now?' came a shout from the left.  
'Drummond, have you ammo?'  
From the far side, another shout: 'They've fucking coming again. That way.'  
'For fuck's sake. Drummond?'  
Jimmy turned to his friend, but found him face down in the mud. He stood and lifted him, a dead weight, turned him over. There was a hole in Drummond's face, and the life had leaked out of it.  
'Ah fuck...fuck. Medic. Shit, Medic.' Jimmy screamed, he called, but there was no medic.  
It made no difference. Drummond was dead. The lashes on his back would hurt no more, God rest him all road ever he offended.  
Jimmy looked around. There was a scatter of bodies on the hillside. Men lay groaning. There was a thick mud of dirt and blood and vomit and worse. A dark smell, indescribable, hung over the hilltop like a curse.  
He turned away from the corpse of his friend and went to light a cigarette. His hand shook violently, and he could not light it until Maureen leaned in and held his wrist, held him still. He looked into

her eyes as the smoke plumed into his lungs.

'Jesus, why are you here, Maureen?'

'The world has changed. Hold me now.'

He put out his arm, and she laid her head on his shoulder. Of a sudden, then, they were home again, that day in Mayo when he'd first seen her, they had danced to the fiddle while the rain drenched them, then lain together in the orchard watching the stars. That was the first night she had sung to him, the arcane song of her people, that carnal power. She sang it again to him now.

He took a long drag on his cigarette, then flicked it into the uncaring mud.

'C'mon, let's go home.'

He reached for her, but she spread like vapour between his fingers, rising up.

'Don't leave me, Maureen.'

'I have to go Jimmy, sure hasn't the world changed?'

He stood up to catch the fading mist, but she turned and kicked him in the chest.



**About the author** Kieran lives, works and writes in Dublin. He has had stories published in a variety of outlets including once before in this magazine. This story is based on one of the chapters of his novel-in-progress.

SECOND PRIZE £150

# French Cream

Anne Walsh Donnelly

**M**ake sure they put the coffin in the sitting room. It's the only decent room in the house though it needs a good painting. I want it to look respectable for the wake. You'll come with me to Woodies now and give me a hand picking a suitable colour.'

It's a statement rather than a request. John doesn't do requests.

'And there'll be no need for that,' he says, handing me the letter my solicitor sent him, a month ago.

I stuff the letter in my handbag for now and drink the last bit of my espresso. I'm hoping it might clear the muddy head I've on me since yesterday afternoon.

His text to me: *Only weeks to live*

His words when I phoned: Pancreatic cancer.

The syllables bounced off each other as he spoke.

'When's your next doctor's appointment?' I asked.

'Do you not believe me?'

'Of course I do.'

'I want to be waked in the house.'

'Have you told your family?'

'You're the first and I don't want anybody else knowing yet.'

'You should at least tell your sisters.'

'They have enough to be doing.'

'Why are you telling me?'

All I could hear for a minute was a crackle on the line.

'I'd like to see you before I...'

The line crackled again.

'I'll meet you tomorrow morning in O'Brien's for coffee,' I said. Surely, I'd know by the look of him if it was as bad as he said.



O'Brien's is full of black-suits this morning. It's just across the road from the County Courthouse. The barristers and solicitors are stocking up on caffeine before they do battle for the day. I search John's face as he puts the last bit of bacon into his huge mouth. Nothing wrong with his appetite and he's still built like a bull. He surprises me when he offers to pay. We drive to Woodies. Separately. Meet in the paint aisle.

'So what colour were you thinking of?' I ask.

'Do you remember the name of the colour we used the last time?'

'Taupe.'

What kind of a colour is Taupe anyway? It's neither the one thing nor the other. A grey-brown, that's what it is. But it was the on-trend colour around the time of Karen's Confirmation.

'Are you sure? It's a good while since you painted it,' he says.

'I'm sure. Do you want to paint it the same colour again?'

'Come home, woman, and do it for me.'

'What about Courtyard Cream?'



'Didn't we have that in the bedroom, years ago?'

'Or French Cream. It's a warm colour.'

'French Cream. I like the sound of that. Might be nice on the chimney breast. And the walls?'

'The same or maybe something lighter.'

'I don't know. We'll get tester pots and we can see what's best when we go home.' He moves closer. The man is as delusional as ever.

I hold my breath for a minute. He's full of farm smells. No wonder. And there's dried cow shite on the toes of his black boots. I step back.

'Didn't you say you needed a mirror too? They're in the next aisle. Have a look and I'll get the tester pots for you.'

I watch his long back as he walks down the aisle and I breathe more freely. My head was getting a bit dizzy there, probably from scanning the plethora of pots on the shelves before me. The number of different shades of cream paint is unbelievable. I reach up to get at the tester pots on the top shelf. Someone's breath blows my fringe into my eyes. I turn.

'Christ, I thought you were looking at the mirrors.'

I nearly fall into his chest as I teeter on my heels. What the hell am I wearing high heels with jeans for anyway?

But if I'm truthful it's not the heels that I'm mad with myself about. No. It's more the fact that I'm feeling something; something, I don't want to feel.

Thankfully my left brain kicks me in the behind. You can't go kissing this man. OK, you loved him once, he's the father of your child and he says he has a terminal illness. But remember, you left him for a reason.

'There's something intrinsically sexy about a woman in high heels,' he told me once. Before we married.

'Oh?'

'It's the way they walk, the gait just begs a man to be there when they fall.'

So I started to wear high heels then. My bunioned feet have been complaining ever since.

'Can I help ye with anything?'

The gaudy name tag on the man's jumper tells me his name is Brad.

'No, thanks all the same.'

'We're trying to decide what colour to paint our sitting room,' says John.

'Your sitting room, not ours.'

I put my hands in the back pocket of my jeans and spread my legs to steady myself on my tower heels. Brad gives John a 'sorry for your troubles' look and then abandons us. So much for customer service.

'Paddy's sister did it,' he says.

'What?'

'She went back to her husband to mind him, after he cut his leg off with the chainsaw.'

'More fool her.'

He flinches. Only for a minute, though. And then he's dragging his fingers across his eyes and up towards his forehead squashing the creases as he goes, almost as if he's on the tractor rolling one of his lumpy fields. Then he stops and gives me a 'poor me' look. Well, at least that's what I think it is. But I don't study him long enough to know exactly. I look at the tester pots again.

'How can I get you to come home?'

There's a bit of a three year old in his voice now.

'You can't.'

'I never meant to hurt you. It wasn't you, it was me.'

The old cliché again. Christ. He's worse than some of the characters on those rubbish soaps he used to watch; *EastEnders*, *Corrie*. Of

course, his favourite was *Emmerdale*.

'Say something, will you?' he says.

And I'm thinking as he's talking that he should have been an actor instead of a bloody farmer.

I didn't say much the day I left him. Exhausted after my hydraulic screams. Left without a word after what I saw. Well, he's getting his comeuppance now. At least that's what my poor mother would say, if she knew. Not that that's much consolation.

It's quiet this morning in Woodies. You'd think it would be a bit busier for a Friday. Still, I'd better keep my voice down a bit.

'I found you in the milking parlour riding the hired help. How the hell did you think that wouldn't hurt?'

'I didn't think and it only happened the once,' he says, as he looks up and down the aisle.

'Only the once you got caught, you mean. And I don't care if it was a hundred times.'

'Look at Hillary Clinton, she stayed with Bill.'

'If you were the President of America I might have stayed with you too.'

'And she's doing great now. Hillary.'

'You never listened when we were married either.'

I lower my voice to a whisper. Wouldn't want to give that Brad fella any ideas; he might be listening to us in the next aisle. He doesn't seem to have much else for doing.

'And at least it was a woman that Bill rode.'

We were supposed to have been going away, the two of us, for a week in Spain – Alicante. One of those second honeymoon thingies that stale couples do. I had great plans. A week of long overdue uninterrupted sex. All packed and ready to go. Me, giving instructions to my sister about what Karen would and wouldn't eat. Him out in the milking parlour showing the farm relief lad what had to be done. He was a great relief all right, as was obvious on John's face.

It ended up Karen and myself going on the second honeymoon and we stayed there. And no, it wasn't a hot young Spaniard that kept me in Alicante. Nothing kept me there apart from the fact that I couldn't come home and live in that house again.

He has his hands full of tester pots now and the fumes from the paint mixer at the end of the aisle are starting to make me dizzy.

'Don't bother with all those. They'll just confuse you. Get the Taupe,' I say.

'It would be nice to change the colour and we both like the French Cream.'

It's a bit late for picking colours that we both like, I'm thinking.

'Stick with what's on it. It's safer.'

He pays for the paint. We stand inside the exit door watching the rain bounce off the pavement.

'I missed ye. And I thought now that ye're back from Spain, well there might be some chance.'

'I didn't come back for you. I came back so that Karen could finish her schooling here and to get our divorce finalised.'

He moves the bucket of paint from one hand to the other. And I'm wondering how a man with six weeks left to live can hold a twelve-litre bucket of paint in a single hand for so long. I zip up my rain jacket and pull the hood over my head.

'So I can't convince you,' he says.

'Why didn't you come after us, when we left?'

'I didn't think you'd stay away so long.'

'It's too late now.'

And I don't even look at him when I'm saying that.

Continued overleaf 



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## French Cream continued

'Turning your back on a sick man.'  
'It wasn't me that had their back turned to you that day in the milking parlour.'  
He flinches again and starts to walk away. Then stops and looks over his shoulder and I'm not sure if it's the rain that's affecting his voice in some way but it's sounding a bit watery now.  
'I should have known you'd never come home. Even now that I'm -'  
'So what the hell was all this about?'  
The rain stops.  
'I... I'm no good at picking colours. You know that.'  
He rubs his face with the back of his free arm.  
'For God's sake, what are you like?'  
He shrugs his shoulders.  
'It really was only the once that it happened. And I've regretted it ever since.'  
And with that he leaves me standing there. On my own. Shuffles into his black Ford Transit van, his head and shoulders descending into nothingness. Something trickles down the side of my nose and it's not a raindrop.  
'Hang on a sec.'  
I race across the car park. He rolls down the window just as I'm about to knock.  
'You're right. A change of colour would be good.'  
'It's a bit silly really. To be worrying about what colour to paint the bloody sitting room when I'm dying ... I just wanted to make everything OK again.' He stares out the windscreen, clenching his fingers around the top of the gear stick.  
I look at the side of his face and notice how pale his cheeks are. And there seems to be a tinge of yellow in the lines around his eyes.  
'Go and get the French Cream. Karen and myself might call around when you get the sitting room painted, to see how it looks.'  
That puts a small bit of colour into his face. As he heads back into Woodies with the Taupe paint, I root through the rubbish in my handbag until I find the solicitor's letter. The wind nearly takes it out of my hand as I open it. I tear it in two and leave it on the dashboard of his van. There's a bit of grit in one of my eyes. I search my handbag for a tissue, then run to my car before it starts to rain again.



**About the author** Anne lives in the west of Ireland with her two children. She works as a student services officer and writes in her spare time. She hopes that readers will enjoy reading her stories as much as she enjoys writing them.

## Highly commended

There were nine shortlisted stories this month:

- Under Her Skin* by Ben Howels
- The Elephant Table* by Adena Graham
- Caveat Emptor* by Jenny Roman
- Woman at the Door* by Anne Walsh Donnelly
- Sing the Lonely Ones* by Olivia Norman
- Rosemary's Baby* by Sandra Crook
- Spark* by Mark Newman
- The Life of an Over-le-Lacking Woman* by Neil Swinney
- Turf Magic* by Shirley Anne Cook



THIRD PRIZE £100

## Domino Effect

Haydn Cavanagh

blame Norman for the whole sorry affair, or more to the point, I blame Norman for the fact that he always followed the part of his anatomy that should stay safely nestled in his M&S boxers. Other brands available. Had Norman not been led by that particular appendage, he would never have booked some cheap B&B on the Yorkshire coast. However, with one flash of the lovely Julie's big false – steady now – lashes, he was off up to Bridlington like a rat up a drainpipe. Even the 'No dogs allowed' couldn't deter him. That's how I ended up with Princess Laya, Norman's golden labrador.

'All you have to do,' he assured me, 'is feed and exercise her twice a day, Bob's your uncle and Fanny's your aunt.'

'A bit like the wonderful Julie then?'

He ignored that. 'Look mate, it couldn't be easier.'

It could have been easier though, couldn't it, Norman? It could have been easier if you had brought a bloody lead. But he didn't and that was that. Too busy organising bed and breakfast for the luscious Julie; more bed than breakfast I wouldn't wonder. I would have to improvise on the lead situation.

Life is not complicated for the man who can improvise.

So that was Norman's input, but then there was the dentist. It was the dentist that had, on that fateful day, filled my head so full of novocaine that I had lost all feeling in the lower part of my face. I could hardly move my mouth, never mind speak. I could just about manage to dribble a thin line of drool down my chin, which due to the lack of sensation, I was completely oblivious to. Nice eh?

It was on returning home from the dentist that I dropped the damned house keys down the street drain. I could see them: I just couldn't quite reach them. For less organised individuals that could have been the end of the world, but not for yours truly. I had spare keys in the shed and, in my kitchen drawer, an ingenious device, you know the one, it extends like an aerial and has a little magnet on the end. Piece o' cake.

Life is not problematical for the man who is organised.

Letting myself in with the spares I found my tool and turned to go and retrieve the keys. Princess Laya however, had other plans; she was sitting in my path staring up intently, mind melding with me. I think she was telling me she needed a wee. The novocaine allowed no intelligible speech, so I simply said:

'Oo wana bo por a bee?' I imagine the drool continued to run down my chin.

Princess Laya's tail wagged enthusiastically. OK, two birds with one stone and all that, I decided to take her with me.

Life is not difficult for the man who can multi-task.

Now remember, guys, I had no lead. I did, however, have a belt on my high-viz motorcycle jacket that was hanging in the hall. I whipped the belt from off the jacket, looped it around Princess Laya's collar and we stepped out into the sunshine.

Now, on that particular day, I was wearing prescription sunglasses. You know the sort, those with reactive lenses that respond to sunlight; basically the sun turns them black. I lay down by the drain and started fishing for my keys.

So there you have it. You can almost hear it coming, can't you? There I was lying in the road, with what could only be described as a long white stick in my hand, dark lensed spectacles on my nose and a golden labrador on a florescent yellow lead. What could possibly go wrong?

It was at that point two nuns appeared on the scene.



'Oh my, God!' exclaimed one.

'Sister Magdalen, please!' reprimanded the other.

'Sorry, Sister Agnes, but look at that poor blind chap, he's gone and fallen down in the street.'

'Sister Magdalen! Visually impaired if you don't mind.'

'Shall we see if we can get the poor fellow back on his feet?'

It all happened in a flash; in no time at all I was manhandled to my feet and brushed down by the enthusiastic nuns. Now, for those of you who have been paying attention, you will remember that, still under the influence of the dentist's cocaine, I spoke only with a passable likeness to John Merrick.

'Shleath dunno woree em awl rice.'

'What did he say, Sister?'

'I don't know, Sister, do you think he's pissed?'

'Sister Magdalen! Mind your language!'

'He doesn't smell of alcohol, Sister, maybe he's de... audibly impaired.'

'Or Welsh by the sound of him'

'Shall I ask him if he's Welsh, Sister?' And with that she shouted into my face. 'Are you Welsh, sir?'

'No arm awl rysh.'

'He says he's Irish, Sister.'

'No... arm... a wl...rysh. Leb... nee... be... aloam!'

'I'm not sure, Sister, he could be hard of hearing, poor fellow that he is.'

'Quickly now, we must get him into church. Father Patrick will know what's best.'

And before you could say Jack Robinson, the Sisters of Mercy frog marched me across the street and dragged me up the stairs into the Church of the Sacred Heart.

Inside the church, the priest was arranging prayer books and, strangely, four large ladies were being photographed.

'Look, Father! Look!' declared one of the nuns.

'Look what we've found.' I was pushed forward triumphantly.

'What shall we do with him, Father?'

'Can we keep him, Father?'

'Well, I am sure we can't keep him, Sister, but we could sit him in a pew and give him a cup of tea, I should think,' replied the priest.

'He can't see nor hear, Father!'

'Or it could be that he's just foreign!'

'I am sure he can still drink tea,' sympathised the priest.

'Yes, Father, of course,' and the pair of them scuttled off to find refreshments.

'You shall be in our prayers, my son,' said the priest and then, thinking better of it, repeated himself at twice the volume. 'I SAID. YOU WILL BE IN OUR PRAYERS!' Thankfully, he was then distracted by one of the ladies posing before the camera.

Continued overleaf

► **Domino Effect continued**

'Coeee! Father Patrick!' 'Yes, Sheila?' 'It's time for us take our clothes off!' Sheila sang brightly. 'In that case, it is time for me to disappear.' 'Thank you, Father.' 'Whard!?' I drooled, somewhat shocked. 'Whard der duck!?' The priest explained, enunciating each word clearly with exaggerated lip contortions: 'The... Women's... Institute... are... performing... *Calendar... Girls*,' he mouthed. 'They...are... having... their... photos... taken... by... the... local... press. Apparently... it... involves... the... removal... of... some... of... their... clothing,' he turned again to the would-be actors. 'OK, ladies, you're good to go. I will be in the vestry.'

'No peeking now, Father!' flirted Sheila. 'I swear on all that's holy,' and he crossed himself. 'And this poor chap won't be able to see anything; you can strip away with impunity, ladies.' And with that, he left.

'OK actors! It's time to bite the bullet,' said Sheila. 'After three, get your kit off! One! Two! Three... Go!' And without further ado and with a vigour unexpected of women of a certain age, particularly in mind of the present venue, they began to strip.

'You wouldn't believe this,' Sheila announced whilst whipping off her flannelette tracksuit bottoms, 'but of all days, this is the day I decided to go commando.'

As one, the women shrieked with delight. That was it. In sheer panic I leapt to my feet, adrenalin kicking in and overriding the anaesthetic; I shouted with all my might.

'I can see! I can see!' For a split second there was complete silence; then all hell broke loose.

The priest, a look of rapture on his face, fell to his knees before the statue of the Virgin and started talking in tongues. The returning nuns were stopped dead in their tracks.

'Sweet Mother of God!' shouted the first nun. 'It's a blessed miracle... he can see!'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' whispered the second, and she too fell to her knees, clutching her crucifix to her lips.

'Praise be the Lord!' The priest, now prostrate before the Virgin Mother, manically recited scripture: 'Our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...'

The fat ladies, screaming now, were desperately climbing back into their clothes.

The photographer, with one rather professional click, captured the whole damn thing for prosperity.

It was all over the local press the following day and it hit the nationals the day after that.

I am presently in hiding in a safe house on the Yorkshire Moors. I have grown a beard, dyed my hair and changed my name by deed poll.

I live in fear. I live in fear of being pursued by the Sisters of Mercy, I live in fear of being hunted down by Opus Dei. But most of all, I live in fear of being captured by the ladies of the WI and I'm haunted by the image of Sheila, stalking me across the moors, commando style.



**About the author** Yorkshire born and bred, Haydn has been telling stories in his head since he was a boy. He has only recently attempted to get some down in print. He is delighted with this first success.

Every so often a story comes along that satisfies on every level – to such an extent that the piece is read over and over for the sheer pleasure of luxuriating in the author's powerful use of language. One such is *Death is the Sound of Distant Thunder* by Kieran Marsh, this month's winning story.

Kieran puts the reader into the heart and mind of a young soldier whose wife has joined him on the eve of one of the conflict's bloodiest battles. He could have opened with his protagonist already facing enemy fire, but he chooses (wisely) to allow the reader to get to know Jimmy before sending him to face his destiny.

*They lay like children in the tent, glorying in the closeness of each other. The smells, the touches, lingering fingers, the softness of skin; it was like their first time. They were a year married, but a month apart as they had made their separate ways to this fierce cauldron in Africa.*

As they make love, Maureen's voice sings out.

*As he rolled with her, she sang songs that were ancient when men first walked in Ireland, the songs that spoke to the spirits of the Daoine Sídh. Slender tendrils touched their bodies, ice cold, fire hot. He was consumed by them, sucked into her world, overwhelmed.*

Afterwards, they sleep. He woke with a start, she with a scream. From the closeness and passion of their coming together, Maureen's vision tears them apart even as Jimmy has to leave to join the ranks.

As a reader, I wanted to reach out and protect him from the dreadful scenes he was sure to face.

Kieran makes good use of colour to enhance his settings.

*Outside the technicolor tent, the world was grey. Grey clay that turned to sticky grey mud in the twice a day thunderstorms only to be baked back to clay*

*under the unforgiving Natal sun.*

This is the story of ordinary men forced to face extraordinary dangers in a war not of their making. It brings home the realisation that men such as Jimmy have always been cannon fodder.

As he receives his fatal shot,



it's as if Maureen herself has fired the weapon.

*He reached for her, but she spread like vapour between his fingers, rising up.*

*'Don't leave me, Maureen.'*

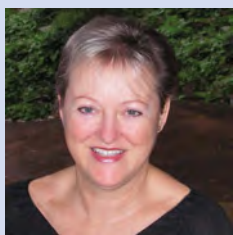
*'I have to go, Jimmy, sure hasn't the world changed?'*

*He stood up to catch the fading mist, but she turned and kicked him in the chest.*

Credible characters, settings that wrap themselves around the reader, natural dialogue, history, myth, forces ancient as nature itself – a worthy winner!

**French Cream** by Anne Walsh Donnelly is another tale of spouses coming together after a





## Competition round-up

# Using all the author's tools

Lorraine Mace explains why she chose this month's winners



separation. With subject matter ranging from a prospective divorce to terminal illness, this could easily be a depressing read. But Anne handles all with some gentle humour.

The story opens with dialogue from the husband, who says that he will soon be dead.

*'Make sure they put the coffin in the sitting room. It's the only decent room in the house though it needs a good painting. I want it to look respectable for the wake. You'll come with me to Woodies now and give me a hand picking a suitable colour.'*

Sharp and witty, the dialogue gradually uncovers the couple's reason for breaking apart. It is nicely crafted to

sound exactly like a bickering couple raking over the coals of past disagreements, playing the blame game.

I like the way John's real reason for calling is introduced.

*'Paddy's sister did it,' he says.*

*'What?'*

*'She went back to her husband to mind him, after he cut his leg off with the chainsaw.'*

*'More fool her.'*

When Anne reveals what blew the marriage apart, the exchange sings with humour and a touch of sarcasm.

*'I found you in the milking parlour riding the hired help. How the hell did you think that wouldn't hurt?'*

*'I didn't think and it only happened the once,' he says, as he*

### Using history in fiction

This month's winning story vividly paints the terrible conflict of the Boer War, but not at any time does the author tell historic details. Instead, he shows what it was like to be there on the battlefield: hiding against a wall, losing a friend, being too scared to move but terrified to stay still. He brings the conditions to the fore through the eyes and mind of the protagonist. When using historical settings, wear your research lightly. Don't feel obliged to tell readers what it was like in those times. Allow your characters to do that for you.

looks up and down the aisle.

*'Only the once you got caught, you mean. And I don't care if it was a hundred times.'*

*'Look at Hillary Clinton, she stayed with Bill.'*

*'If you were the President of America I might have stayed with you too.'*

*'And she's doing great now. Hillary.'*

*'You never listened when we were married either.'*

*I lower my voice to a whisper. Wouldn't want to give that Brad fella any ideas; he might be listening to us in the next aisle. He doesn't seem to have much else for doing.*

*'And at least it was a woman that Bill rode.'*

By the end of the story I believed in this couple so wholeheartedly, I smiled when I realised she was going to stay around until John's demise.

Quirky humour, characters it was easy to warm to and lovely exchanges of dialogue made it easy to place this story.

I chose *Domino Effect* by Haydn Cavanagh simply for the joy of reading well-written situational comedy. I have mentioned before that humour is one of the hardest forms to master, but Haydn makes it seem easy. He builds his scenes until, even though you know what is coming next, you still

cannot help laughing.

I wasn't sure where Haydn was going with the story until the arrival on the scene of two nuns, when all became clear – at least to me, if not to the nuns.

*There I was lying in the road, with what could only be described as a long white stick in my hand, dark-lensed spectacles on my nose and a golden Labrador on a florescent yellow lead. What could possibly go wrong?*

Believing him to be blind and deaf (or possibly Welsh or Irish) the sisters manhandle him to the church where fear of seeing the ladies of the WI undress for a photo shoot forces him to overcome the effect of novocaine and declare he can see.

Even if Haydn hadn't been able to make the reader believe in totally improbable scenes, his dialogue would have carried the day. No matter how many times I read it, this makes me laugh out loud.

*'Whard!?' I drooled, somewhat shocked. 'Whard der duck!?''*

Lorraine is co-author of *The Writer's ABC Checklist* (Accent Press) and author of children's novel *Vlad the Inhaler* (LRP)



# Fiction workshop



with tutor  
**Lorraine Mace**

Our head judge uses reader entries to show how to improve your writing

## Don't start at the very beginning

Even though Julie Andrews' instruction to 'start at the very beginning' is good advice for most things, it isn't always so for writers. Opening in this way often means giving the reader information they don't need to have at that point (in fact, quite often, they don't need the information at all).

The best place to start a story is right in the middle of the action – the point at which the characters have to do or say something, or discover a fact, that will change the course of their lives. This puts the reader into the character's mind, making it easier to identify with the issues and their outcome.

The opening should show readers what the story is about: what is important and why it matters.

### Misleading set-ups

In Maureen Kishtaini's *A Flight of Fancy*, the opening contains an implication that the story is going to be about something sinister that will happen on a flight and/or the narrator's sudden fear of flying.

*Another journey home. Another eight hours in a cocoon of unreality. As soon as the sign goes off, I undo my seat belt, stretch my legs and rotate my shoulder as I make myself comfortable. Though this is one of the better airlines, I still feel trapped. I'm not happy within such a cramped personal space and nowhere to go. Beads of sweat trickle between my breasts. For the first time ever, I feel nervous. Those recent plane crashes have unsettled me. I haven't yet*

*bothered to take any interest in the person sitting beside me.*

The rest of the passage goes on to describe the fellow passenger and give some dialogue between them.

Having set up the story in such a way, the reader is expecting a plane malfunction, or some other near disaster from which the passenger will rescue the narrator, or vice versa. However, the storyline runs on quite different lines – it is a tale of two unhappy marriages and a promise to meet at a later date that never materialises.

I would suggest reworking the opening to give the reader a better idea of what is to come.

Another story falling into this category is Geraldine Miller's *A Door Full of Memories*.

*Emma was removing the fridge magnets from the front of her fridge, ready for the delivery of a new one the next day. As she did so, she found herself looking at each one. To anyone else they were just magnets with pictures on that decorated the fridge. To Emma, however, they were a library of memories which she could choose to borrow from at any time.*

The feeling I get from reading this is that one of the fridge magnets is going to trigger a memory that will impact on Emma in a major way; that this memory will be the lynchpin around which the plot unfolds.

In point of fact, the story simply recalls every special event connected to the collection and takes the reader



on a trip down memory lane. It is a pleasant trip, full of happy moments, but the lack of conflict and resolution means (for the reader) there isn't enough to invest in on an emotional level.

### Will readers care?

Very often stories open with events and details that are only of interest to the characters. The information given would not pique a reader's curiosity. I've picked out three stories that illustrate this.

*Two Tribes* by Sharon Connor tells the reader about Ella, the protagonist, as a child.

*Ella had never ranked as one of the popular girls at school. Always middle of the road, she had unexceptionally plodded along, getting average grades, always one of the last to be picked for the netball team. The only time she stood out was when the register was taken each September, and full names and addresses were checked. Ella's mother had been entranced by the old Noël Coward*

*film Blithe Spirit, and when her form teacher read out her given first name, Elvira Hughes, it never failed to produce giggles from her classmates. It was hardly a common first name for an inner-city schoolgirl in the 1980s.*

The story goes on to tell the reader more about Ella's life, gradually working up to the conflicts she faces in the present day, which is where the story really begins. I would suggest opening this story by showing Ella in the midst of a conflict scene, illustrating her difficulty in fitting in. Readers can find out why she is as she is from her actions and dialogue as the story progresses.

Grahame Maclean falls into a similar trap with his wonderfully titled *The things he could do with a newspaper*.

*Tommy Boyle was in a fine mood as he walked home from work down the long cobbled street. On the far side of the valley he could see the dark satanic textile mills, spread out across the*



landscape, as far as the eye could see. It was where most of the population of the small Yorkshire town worked after leaving school at fourteen and offered a way of life and close community.

The scene-setting continues for a further page and a half before Tommy arrives home to be greeted by his wife. Shortly thereafter, he enacts one of the many things he can do with a newspaper – cutting squares to hang in the outside toilet. The story later contains some delightful passages, showing Tommy as a resourceful and entertaining character. In point of fact, the only thing he cannot do with a newspaper is read it. By the time we find this out, we are already half in love with Tommy and feel his anguish over his lack of education.

For this story, I would dispense with most of the introduction and simply open with Tommy carrying his newspaper home, stopping to perform one of his papery bits of magic because someone is in need.

The third example for this category comes from Sandra Gordon, whose *Aunt Miriam's New Home* opens with a passage of dialogue.

*'Good morning, Auntie,' Jacqui uttered sleepily, as she walked past Miriam's makeshift bedroom.*

*'Morning,' echoed her aunt. She was stroking cream along the*

*length of her neck, lost in her own reflection. 'Did I tell you that my hairdresser says I have real good skin?'*

*'You've mentioned it once or twice,' Jacqui said with a wry smile.*

*'You should think of using this,' called Miriam, holding out a pink tube. 'I'll send you some when I get back to the States.'*

*'Thanks. D'you want tea?' said Jacqui, making her way to the kitchen.*

*'No. Had one a while back.'*

After some more dialogue about a visit to a garden centre, the mirror Aunt Miriam is peering into is mentioned. The mirror has engravings on the inside, which is significant in plot terms, but is passed over so quickly that its importance to the storyline is lost. In fact, the vain Aunt Miriam ends up living contentedly inside the mirror which has somehow absorbed her in both body and spirit.

For this story, I would advise bringing in the mirror much sooner and planting the seed that there is something a little otherworldly about it. Not in a heavy-handed way, but so that when the denouement comes, the reader can think: 'Of course, I should have seen that coming!'

### And then she woke up

*The Curse of the Zip*, a children's story by Avril Suddaby, opens

with a situation with which many young readers would identify.

*It was a few days before Tashie's eighth birthday when disaster struck. When she came back to her classroom after lunchtime play, she found that the zip on her lovely pink ski jacket was stuck. She tugged and tugged, but it wouldn't shift, so she asked her teacher, Ms Bleasdale, to help her.*

The story goes on to tell how Tashie's zip was just the start of a catastrophic failure of all the zips in the land, leading to the Prime Minister having to make statements in the House. It is an amusing idea, but at the end of the story we discover it has all been a dream and Tashie is about to put on the pink ski jacket.

The problem with this is that the reader feels cheated. Having invested time in reading the story, it is disappointing to discover that none of it was real.

### It's there, but ...

Sometimes a story's opening contains a good reason to read on, but it is tacked on to the end of a passage of unnecessary information. David Stokes' *War Hero* falls into this category.

*Twenty years ago, in that first summer after the Great War, it seemed that anything was possible. On a Friday in April, I was a gangling schoolboy, lolling about in a desk far too small for me. The following Monday, I was a man (or thought I was), working for my first wage packet. I know it was different in other towns, but the holiday makers were coming back to Weymouth and there were jobs in the big hotels for likely lads. I was taken on at the Rex as a trainee hall porter. It was about that time that I joined Southlands Cricket Club and, a few weeks later, I met Harry Vinton.*

Only the part in bold has anything to do with the story that follows – and it is the meeting with Harry Vinton

around which the plot unfolds. I would suggest rethinking this opening. Tacking it on to the end in this way stops it from having any impact.

### Does it set the tone?

*Be Careful What You Wish For* by Mi Ackland has a title that hints the story might be unsettling, or even stray into horror, which is in fact the case. However, the opening, although it has elements that could be tweaked, doesn't quite match the title's sinister undertone.

*'It would be far better to come out for a walk, Tim, than to hide away here chopping wood.'*

*The tap tapping of the axe fell silent and a pair of blue eyes peeped round the edge of the woodshed.*

*'I need thinking time, Natasha. Just peace and quiet. That's what the doctor said.' His voice wavered, but a note of defiance ran through it, too.*

*'The doctor didn't recommend chopping wood for hours on end! Anyway, that doctor talks a whole bunch of rubbish. Getting back to work is what you need – as soon as possible.'*

Apart from the mention of an axe, there isn't a strong enough sense of menace in this opening. I would have liked to feel a frisson of anxiety as I read. A suggestion, perhaps in the form of a sullen glance, that Tim resented his wife's words. When Natasha goes off for a walk alone, she meets a mysterious woman in the woods who issues the warning contained in the title, but until this point (which comes quite late in the story) there is no reason to fear that her life might be in danger.

• Writing as Frances di Plino, Lorraine Mace is author of the DI Paolo Storey crime series. Her latest book is *Looking for a Reason*



### Don't stress over the opening in a first draft

The natural starting place is sometimes not evident until after you've written the story. Don't worry too much about opening in the right way. Get the story down in full and then examine it to decide:

- Where does the real story start?
- Where is the note of conflict or intrigue that shows what the story is about?
- How can this be used as a hook to entice the reader?
- Can the reader identify with the character's present situation? Past conflicts rarely make good opening paragraphs.
- Does the opening set the tone for the story's genre?
- Does the opening fit the storyline or does it mislead?

Deliberately misleading the reader can be a great way to start a story, if done well, but unintentionally doing so could result in reader confusion.

# DON'T GIVE UP THE DAY JOB!

Robin Dynes looks at ways of developing a writing career while holding down a job – and making it work to your advantage

**D**o you dream about giving up the day job in order to write? Think again. You could be ditching the key to your success.

Also, as previously reported in this magazine, the median earnings for professional writers in the UK is just £11,000. Only 11.5 per cent of writers earn their income solely from writing. No wonder the novelist John Gardner once suggested that if you are serious about writing you should find a patron!

## Writers with other jobs

Most of us who do not have a patron, and don't want to starve, have another job. Many writers have actively chosen to continue work in other fields.

Anton Chekhov was a doctor, Philip Larkin and Jorge Luis Borges were librarians and Franz Kafka worked in insurance. TS Eliot was in banking – passages of *The Waste Land* were inspired by things he saw when walking to work. Scott Turow continues to practise law and Salley Vickers is a psychoanalyst. Henry Green went into the office of his family's business every day because he liked the structure and the gossip.

So those of us who work are in good company!

## Making it work to your advantage

Employment in writing-related fields – editing, proof-reading, publishing or teaching creative writing – works for some and can help you get a foot in the door. Others may feel that this is overwhelming, akin to drowning, and want to get

as far away from writing as possible. Whatever your choice of method you can make it work to your advantage.

In my own case, after having had some success with short stories and general articles, the obvious next step was pointed out by others.

Picture the scene in the occupational therapy department of a psychiatric hospital. Colleagues crowded around desks, busily planning activity groups, searching for fresh ideas and activities to inspire and motivate patients.

I make a comment: 'What we need are some books to help us with this preparation.' There is an immediate silence. Suddenly a loud voice: 'You're supposed to be a writer! Why don't you write one?'

Inspired and encouraged by colleagues, I did just that. Some 24 books and hundreds of feature articles later, I am still making use of experience and knowledge gained from the day job. No matter what you do or what you write – fiction or non-fiction – why don't you do the same?

## The advantages

■ It gives meaning to the day job. It's no longer a soulless job you do just to earn money. It doesn't have to be an obstacle or block to writing. Use it to feed and nourish your ambition to write.

■ Your colleagues can provide special knowledge, making research easier. They can also put you in touch with their sources for information.

■ It provides ideas and opportunities for authentic backgrounds for both stories and non-fiction. Whatever



you do, there is opportunity to feed your imagination. For instance, if you are a cleaner, look at pictures on desks, notices on boards, etc. Then use your imagination! *What if two best friends apply for the same promotion advertised? Both need the extra money and each resents the other applying.*

Ask yourself the 'What if ...?' question about all the things you notice to give you an endless supply of story ideas, and adapt them to the market for which you want to write.

You can feed your imagination in this way in any job, be it bricklayer, therapist or vet. Use what is happening around you as material. Lovers falling out, petty jealousies, confidences shared and the absurdities of the job – all well disguised, of course.

■ You stay in touch with the real world and add that feeling of authentic experience. It will

show in the way you describe scenes and emotions.

■ It keeps you up to date. Change is constant in all jobs and is influenced not only by advances in your field but by outside events, such as government changes of direction, inflation, a rise in unemployment etc. Those authentic touches will ensure your writing feels current and real. It enables you to know what it is like to fear losing your job, to be competitive, get bored, make and lose friends, fear failure, enjoy success and much more.

■ Coffee breaks, lunch periods and spare moments when you stare out a window or daydream – we all do it – can be used to work out woolly thoughts, to think through a plot you are having difficulty getting right. The more repetitive or monotonous the task you're paid for, the more



Authentic touches ensure your writing feels current and real

you can use the time to think. Often being in a different location allows your brain to work in another way and solutions pop into mind.

■ Writing can be a lonely business – most jobs will give you companionship, friends and insights away from your writing passion.

■ When writing non-fiction, ask people what they need to help them do a better job and make their life easier. You may just discover a subject and a market you can fill. Once your reputation has been established, you can then expand into other markets.

### Filling the 'inner well'

Without a different job that takes you away from your passion, you might find you have no food for thought, no structure to your day and very little to write about.

Over the long haul – and keeping a writing career going is a long haul – you need to keep what Julia Cameron, in her book *The Artist's Way*, calls your 'inner well' or 'reservoir' well stocked with fish. If you don't, your 'well' will dry up.

She says: 'As artists we need to be self-nourishing. We must become alert enough to consciously replenish our creative resources as we draw on them – to restock the trout pond, so to speak. I call this process filling the well.'

Having a day job can help you fill that pond with fish – whether you write non-fiction or fiction.

A note here: it is essential to keep a notebook with you at all times, to write down ideas and thoughts that occur, including information given by

colleagues. If you don't, you'll struggle to recall them later.

### Other ways colleagues can help

Ask colleagues to read your work to check that details are right. Facts might be anything from the effects of different soil on plants to what it feels like to be attacked by a customer in a retail outlet.

Depending on what you are writing, your boss or a colleague – holding a respected position or qualification – might be persuaded to write an introduction for your book. For a non-fiction book especially, this can be a strong influence towards getting an acceptance.

### Make it work for you

Combining writing with my day job worked for me and earned me additional respect and opportunities: writing a local authority newsletter, copywriting, writing feature articles for national magazines, teaching creative writing.

Using writing and reading as a means of helping patients was also invaluable. It helped them make sense of their experience, develop hope for their future and arrive at a deeper understanding of themselves. Thus writing became a means of developing the day job as well as a means of feeding and developing my writing passion. I imagine all those writers mentioned earlier didn't do it solely to earn money either...

It can work equally well for you. Turn that day job into a resource for keeping that 'reservoir' well stocked with fish and building your writing career. Go to it!

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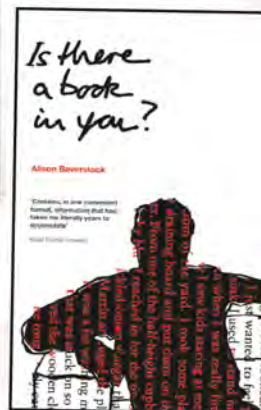
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# IMPERMANENCE

The following poem, taken from Tibetan folklore, invites us all to consider the nature of eternity and its flip-side, impermanence. Read it slowly, then give some thought to its simple but profound message.

In the cold Northern wastes  
There is a mountain  
A thousand miles long  
A thousand miles high

Once each thousand years  
A small bird flies North  
To sharpen his beak  
On the cold hard stone

When the bird  
Has worn the mountain away  
One second of Eternity  
Shall have passed.

Now, for the first part of this month's exercise, write a poem about impermanence using the format of the Tibetan poem, ie:

- *Stanza one: Somewhere there is something that seems very permanent indeed*
- *Stanza two: Every so often something happens*
- *Stanza three: The consequence of stanza two on stanza one*

## Stargazing

In Glyn Maxwell's poem, *Stargazing*, the narrator goes out to look at the stars with a companion. He tries to point out the constellations to her and she pretends to see them. The poem ends:

... you will turn to her  
and, in an instant, change the universe  
to a sky you were glad you came outside to see.

This is the act of all the descended gods  
of every age and creed: to weary of all  
that never ends, to take a human hand,  
and go back into the house.

Write about a time when you stood looking at something physical that seemed permanent, eg the stars, the sky, a mountain or a fjord landscape, the ocean. Write about how it made you feel. Then write about how you turned away and did something else, eg went back to work, had



a cheese sandwich, called your mother, washed the car, ran into the bank and had to queue for ages when you were parked on a double-yellow line.

When you have completed your poem, write the same poem again, but this time from the perspective of the something physical that seemed to you permanent. How does the sky, ocean or mountain feel to be looked at then left? Does it feel permanent? Does it want to say something to you – maybe tell you a joke or say something very profound?

## Six couplets on impermanence

That's enough using other poems and templates. For this part of the exercise, make a list of six nouns and six verbs you associate with impermanence. Ideally, these need to be nouns and verbs you haven't used in your previous poems.

| Nouns   | Verbs   |
|---------|---------|
| 1 _____ | 1 _____ |
| 2 _____ | 2 _____ |
| 3 _____ | 3 _____ |
| 4 _____ | 4 _____ |
| 5 _____ | 5 _____ |
| 6 _____ | 6 _____ |

Now write six free-standing couplets using one of the nouns and one of the verbs in each couplet.

Then put the couplets together to form a poem. Make any changes you need

to build your narrative or keep your rhythm. Combine the couplets to form stanzas and add extra lines if necessary.

And, because this is an exercise focusing on impermanence, if one of the couplets can't be adapted to be of benefit to your poem, lose it. Feel no qualms whatsoever at its loss. Do whatever it takes to make your poem speak as honestly and clearly as possible.

## A personal perspective

Write about a time when you felt invincible, unstoppable, unsinkable or, as someone I know always puts it, bulletproof?

For many of us this is a feeling that comes with youth but maybe that isn't the case with you. Write about the feeling and its cause. How did it make you behave? Are you proud of the way you acted or embarrassed? Is it a time you wish could come again?

When you have done this, try the reverse. Write about a time when you felt very impermanent indeed. Write about the feeling and its cause. How did it make you behave? Are you proud of the way you acted or embarrassed? Is it a time you wish could come again?

Now write about the previous two situations from the perspective of someone with whom you came into contact. How did what you were feeling make this other person behave? What might they have to say that you have forgotten? What might





with poetry editor  
**Sue Butler**

they have told other people about you?  
What might they have kept to themselves?

### You thought it was permanent

Write about something you'd come to think of as being permanent but that turned out not to be. Examples include:

- A friendship or other important relationship you thought was forever.
- A negative feeling you had for someone – anger, despair, exasperation – that changed due to something they did or something you learned.
- A job you hoped to do until you retired.
- A house you planned to live in always.
- A religious or political belief that you were convinced would never alter.
- Your hair, strength, eyesight, hearing, memory or some other aspect of health.
- An interest or ability in painting, singing, gardening, travelling, fundraising etc that one day was gone: you simply couldn't or didn't want to do it any more.
- A promise you were convinced you would never break.

### Impermanence and the future

Write about how you would act differently if you really – and I mean really – understood and accepted the impermanence of the human condition. How would you behave, from waking through to going to sleep at night?

Write a poem or a series of poems about a single day. Try to capture your emotions as intensely as you can. What becomes important? What becomes less important? What is easier or harder? What do you want more of or less of? Is this knowledge of impermanence a blessing or a curse?

### Where to go from here...

If this month's workshop has inspired you, don't forget you can enter the monthly competition, where you stand a chance of winning £100 and a dictionary and have the option to request a brief critique.

If competitions are not your thing or you'd like more detailed and targeted feedback from me, you can purchase an extended critique of three poems for £35. Please email me at [poetry@writers-forum.com](mailto:poetry@writers-forum.com) for details.

## IN MY OWN WORDS

### Silence

My silence is a wire mesh, galvanised  
and two taut-metres high.  
Lightning-bolt signs are everywhere.  
You ignore them and climb, expecting  
equal and opposite kindness, not  
the spark-thump-jolt of defence.  
You want and need to believe  
it's a mistake. It's me,  
you call then climb again.

I'll never forget this sizzle  
of your skin, charred and flaking  
into moths that bang their wings  
on the backs of my eyes and lay eggs.  
Holes appear. I crouch in one  
as you pull the pin from my name.

### Sue Butler says:

As from issue #169, the In My Own Words feature will be changing format, so I was hoping to round in a blaze of glory this month by featuring a super poem by a super poet. Unfortunately, life's inevitable difficulties got in the way, so you've got a poem by me.

I wince when I re-read it but what I describe is based on something that did actually happen. No, the poem doesn't reflect well on me but it does capture a moment when I was more than willing to burn a friend and burn them badly – not once, but twice. They were acting out of kindness and they deserved much better.

May this poem be a warning: Please don't treat your friends as shabbily as I did. And if you're the friend, think carefully before going back to be burned for a second time.

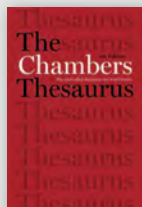
• Sue produces a monthly poetry feature for the Beth Chatto Garden ([www.bethchatto.co.uk](http://www.bethchatto.co.uk)) and is responsible for the creative writing feature in Wetherspoon News. A keen walker and yoga practitioner, Sue is a copywriter specialising in weight-loss and health & wellbeing.

## POETRY WORKOUT

**This month use a variety of formats to write up a storm – or some sunshine**

- 1 Write about six different types of rain. Use a different format for each type.
- 2 Give today's weather a voice. Have a dialogue with him or her.
- 3 Imagine a year... no, make that three... when you wake each morning to exactly the same weather. How do you feel? How do you behave?
- 4 You control the weather for the whole world during this month. What weather will you give yourself and your friends? Will it snow in the Sahara? Will anyone get a typhoon?

# Poetry competition



Our first prize poem wins £100 and three runners-up win a copy of the new edition of Chambers Thesaurus, worth £40.

**Poetry editor Sue Butler writes:** *Biscuits* by Jonathan Hill is written from a child's point of view. It has a great opening line – well, opening stanza for that matter – then it gives us a vivid description of the dog. But what is really lovely about this poem is that the dog the narrator envies has need of only four kinds of bark. (A thought-provoking writing exercise would be to identify and explore four sounds and corresponding emotions used by a range of animals.) The image of the narrator rehearsing these barks makes us all recall times in childhood when we acted from the heart with no concern for what an adult might say is 'right' or 'normal'. As for licking a dog biscuit, I'll leave that up to you.

*Calling Batman* by Daniel Crowley isn't written from the perspective of a child but it was written for his nephew, who makes and models Batman costumes for adults and children. I had no idea such a job existed; my careers officer at school never mentioned such a possibility. If they had, I might not have gone into banking so readily.

And it seems as if Batman's powers might be severely challenged in the cityscape of Lucy Brighton's poem *City Living*. Although I don't think even Batman can bring space, colour or quiet to the place Lucy describes. The final line makes the reader think very hard indeed: Are the people who live amongst this soundtrack really nobodies? Who are they? What might they have to say about this cityscape? If you happen to be one of these people, I invite you to pick up your pen and respond.

And poor Batman would definitely have his work cut out trying to stop the rain in *The world is crying* by Joyce Walker. This poem is so sodden with rain, readers will want to wring it out and hang it in the airing cupboard to dry. The rhythm and repetitions here mimic the monotony of day after day of rain. And that the last line has an extra day just adds to the feeling that this rain will go on forever.

But nothing lasts forever and next month the format of the competition will be changing. There will be just one winner – our poetry star of the month – whose poem will be discussed in detail. There will also be an exciting new creative writing challenge based on the winning poem. Details next issue.

## £100 winner

### Biscuits

*Jonathan Hill, Quorn, Leics*

How I envied nextdoor's dog.  
Not for his breath, you'll understand,  
But for his easy popularity  
Amongst the local boys and girls.

Amber eyes, camel coat, white-tipped tail,  
Awareness bristling hair by shiny hair.  
Eyebrows like horizontal question marks  
Above a fang-filled smile.

Four kinds of bark were all he knew,  
But they encompassed everything.  
Joy, suspicion, rage, pain  
No need for further self-expression.

Daily I rehearsed those barks  
To emulate his point of view,  
And attract attention.

Just lick a dog biscuit to know  
Why chocolate hob-nobs fed  
His sweetest dreams.

## Calling Batman

*Daniel Crowley, Worthing, W Sussex*

On a cold winter's night before dusk,  
Batman begins his battle  
to right wrongs in Gotham City  
where crime is rife.

It is time for direct action:  
wrapped up in his black cape,  
he packs useful muscle,  
making scum vamoose.

You superheroes, set on altruism,  
Apollos, men's men, fighters  
followers of Zen – take note.

Clad in steel –  
busy fists knock holes  
through mean-minded filth –  
the Riddler, the Joker and Penguin.

Cat woman – her mewing,  
low brow promiscuity revolts  
our world-wise warrior.

In jet-night shadows,  
fluttering bat returns  
to its batcave, victorious.

You could do the same,  
fight the fires of organised crime,  
make a stand, triumph over time.



## City living

Lucy Brighton, Leeds

We are all compressed like cars in the salvage yard  
Identical shapes stacked one atop the other.  
There's no room to breathe; there's no open spaces  
Just row upon row of concrete monstrosities.

Everything is dull, like a sepia picture  
No vivid colours or well defined edges.  
No vibrant green trees or cyan coloured waters  
Just the insipid work of a dried up palette.

No escape from the cacophony of noises  
Babies crying, tyres screeching, dogs barking.  
It's background noise so loud it's almost deafening.  
The soundtrack to the lives of the nobodies.

## The world is crying

Joyce Walker, Borehamwood, Herts

The world is crying,  
Well it seems that way,  
When it rains day after endless day.

Are the angels crying?  
It seems that way  
For it rains day after endless day.

Perhaps God is crying,  
For man's wayward ways  
And that's why it rains  
Day after day after endless day.

### There are three commended poems this month:

*Heartbreak* by Peter Dean, Great Shelford, Cambridge  
*The Destruction of a Masterpiece* by Sue Rogerson, Felixstowe, Suffolk  
*Mum's Love* by Brigitte Dacosta, Acton, London

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# Literary diary

## FESTIVALS

### **Chester Literature Festival** **10-25 October**

Celebrating literature with a range of events across the city, this year Deborah Moggach, Simon Armitage, Ranulph Fiennes and David Starkey are some of the big names taking part. [www.chesterliteraturefestival.co.uk](http://www.chesterliteraturefestival.co.uk)

### **Guildford Book Festival,** **11-18 October**

The festival hosts some of the nation's most celebrated authors, journalists and opinion leaders. There will be a Readers' Day on the Saturday where many authors visit in one day and discuss an array of thoughts on inspiration, aspiration and working methods. [www.guildfordbookfestival.co.uk](http://www.guildfordbookfestival.co.uk)

### **Mere Literary Festival, Cheshire** **12-18 October**

This festival caters for a wide range of interests including events for children. Audiences are drawn from those living in this rural district and visitors to the town, among them writers shortlisted or commended in the biennial open poetry competition. [www.merelifest.co.uk](http://www.merelifest.co.uk)

### **Thame Arts and Literature Festival, Oxford** **16-18 October**

With over 30 events packed into one weekend, this festival has assembled a feast of delights to engage your brain, ears, eyes and funny bone, and set your imagination soaring. There will be inspiring talks, wonderful music, children's events and much more. [www.talfestival.org](http://www.talfestival.org)

### **Harrogate History Festival** **22-25 October**

Now in its third year, this festival presents some of the most exciting names in historical writing, both fiction and non-fiction, for old and young alike. Ken Follett, Michael Morpurgo, Kate Mosse, Neil Oliver, Emma Darwin and Melvin Bragg are some of the authors taking part. [www.harrogateinternationalfestivals.com](http://www.harrogateinternationalfestivals.com)

### **Yeovil Literary Festival, Yeovil** **29 October – 1 November**

This annual festival will once again see an exciting programme of literature and arts events featuring well-known literary figures, comedians, celebrities and exciting new writers. This year Max Hastings, Andy McNab, Judith Kerr and Jacqueline Wilson are among the big names taking part. [www.yeovilliteraryfestival.co.uk](http://www.yeovilliteraryfestival.co.uk)



Rachel Joyce is in Bath

### **Southwold Literature Festival** **5-9 November**

Part of the Ways with Words series of literature festivals, the small Suffolk seaside resort hosts Melvyn Bragg, Polly Toynbee and Penelope Lively among others. A full programme is online. [www.wayswithwords.co.uk](http://www.wayswithwords.co.uk)

### **Aldeburgh Poetry Festival** **6-8 November**

The 27th Aldeburgh Poetry Festival features more than 60 events, many of them free. Tony Hoagland, John Burnside, Richard Mabey and Jane Duran are among the poets taking part. [www.thepoetrytrust.org](http://www.thepoetrytrust.org)

### **Richmond upon Thames Literature Festival** **6-27 November**

This festival, which is now in its 24th year, features a range of literary figures and personalities covering a variety of subjects including history, music, art, politics and war. [www.richmond.gov.uk/literature\\_festival](http://www.richmond.gov.uk/literature_festival)

### **Bridport Literary Festival** **8-15 November**

The 11th annual festival has an eclectic mix of writers throughout the week to appeal to all ages, including the very young, and all tastes. [www.bridlit.com](http://www.bridlit.com)

### **Folkestone Book Festival** **20-29 November**

For its 15th year, the festival has a packed line-up of literary events and guests from the worlds of history, radio, TV, music and comedy, including Mark Billingham, Melvyn Bragg, Wendy Cope, Jonathan Dimbleby, Deborah Moggach, Tracey Thorn and Lynne Truss. [www.folkestonebookfest.com](http://www.folkestonebookfest.com)

### **Cambridge Literary Winter Festival** **28-29 November**

A staple of the city's cultural calendar, this one-day winter festival welcomes an eclectic

Kate Medhurst brings you the pick of next month's writing and book events

selection of writers for a day of thought-provoking and enlightening talks. [www.cambridgeliteraryfestival.com](http://www.cambridgeliteraryfestival.com)

## AUTHOR & BOOK EVENTS

### **David Moody and Wayne Simmons, Birmingham** **30 October, 7pm**

Waterstones is hosting a pre-Halloween night with the two horror writers. For more details call 0121 631 4333.

### **Jacqueline Wilson, Yeovil** **1 November, 3pm**

The children's author will be at Waterstones revealing how she created some of her best-loved characters. No book signing at the event but pre-signed books will be available. For more details call 01935 422884.

### **Ian Rankin, St Andrews** **4 November, 7pm**

The acclaimed author will be at Hope Park and Martyrs Church launching his new novel *Even Dogs in the Wild*. Tickets cost £3, which is redeemable against a purchase of the book. For more details call 01334 585111.

### **Andy McNab, Chatham, Kent** **6 November, 7.30pm**

The author will be at Waterstones talking about his latest Nick Stone thriller, *Detonator*. For more details call 01634 337799.

### **Robert Harris, Bath** **12 November, 7.30pm**

The bestselling author will be at St Swithin's Church with his new historical fiction novel *Dictator*. Tickets to admit two people to the event and one copy of the book cost £20. For more details call 01225 428111.

### **David Mitchell, Ely** **18 November, 7.30pm**

The author will be at St Mary's Church for a literary lunch to talk about his new novel, *Slade House*, a spin-off from *The Bone Clocks*. Tickets cost £10 and include lunch and £5 redeemable against a purchase of the book. For more details call 01353 645005.

### **Rachel Joyce, Bath** **21 November, 10.30am**

The best-selling author of *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* will be speaking in-depth about her work, including her new collection, *A Snow Garden and Other Stories*. She will be at the Museum of Bath at Work. Tickets cost £7. For more details call 01225 428111.

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# New courses



Radio Drama at beautiful Totleigh Barton, Devon

## RESIDENTIAL COURSE

### Radio Drama, Devon 2-7 November

If you are thinking of writing radio drama, or have already made a start, this course will set you on the road to 'thinking in sound'. You'll learn about developing structure and character, and have the chance to record some of your ideas. It takes place at Totleigh Barton, a 16th-century manor house in one of the most peaceful and idyllic parts of Devon, and costs £725 for full board in a single room, with all workshops, tutorials and readings.

[www.arvon.org](http://www.arvon.org)

## ONE-DAY COURSES

### Editing Short Fiction, Norwich 24 October

Allow Yuka Igarashi, web editor-in-chief at Catapult and former managing editor at Granta, to steer you through the delicate art of editing short fiction in this invaluable workshop for lovers of the short form. This workshop is for writers of all levels. The focus will be on literary rather than genre fiction. It takes place from 10am until 4pm and costs £75.

[www.writerscentrenorwich.org.uk](http://www.writerscentrenorwich.org.uk)

### Start to Write, London 31 October

On the fourth floor of one of the world's most famous publishing houses, you'll get the

hands-on teaching you need to start writing, from acclaimed tutor and novelist Richard Skinner and 14 fellow writers. You'll be writing there and then, getting instant responses, experimenting with structure and techniques, plus tips on what to do next to start your writing life. It costs £75.

[www.faberacademy.co.uk](http://www.faberacademy.co.uk)

## SHORT COURSES

### Writing Historical Fiction, London 29-30 November

This weekend course addresses the pleasures and pitfalls of writing in another time – from how to build plot, character and structure against a historical backdrop, to how to weave real events and people into fictional plots. It includes an invaluable guest session from literary agent Charlie Viney and takes place from 10am until 4pm on Saturday and Sunday. It costs £449.

[www.theguardian.com/guardian-masterclasses](http://www.theguardian.com/guardian-masterclasses)

### An Approach to Creative Writing, London 6 October – 8 December

This course will explore how to find inspiration and make your writing lively and engaging. Students learn the key elements of fiction writing, particularly in relation to short stories and novels. Subjects covered include structure, characterisation, dialogue, point of

## HELPFUL NEW BOOKS

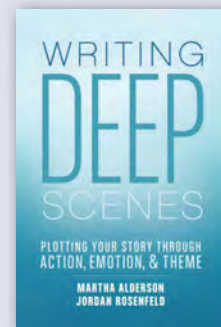
### The Art of Script Editing by Karol Griffith (Creative Essentials, £16.99)



provides a comprehensive overview of the vital role of script editing; examining its responsibilities and functions during all stages of the development process, both in film and television. A valuable resource for anyone

developing a script no matter where they are in the process. Published 24 September.

### Writing Deep Scenes: Plotting Your Story Through Action, Emotion and Theme (Kindle Edition, £9.50)



is suitable for you whether you're planning your first novel or have already written a first draft. Filled with practical tools, it teaches you how to write strong, layered and engaging scenes – the secret to memorable,

page-turning plots. Published 4 September.

view, narrative voice, style and how to develop, sustain and end a story. The course takes place weekly over 10 weeks and costs £255.

[www.city.ac.uk](http://www.city.ac.uk)

## ONLINE COURSES

### Introduction to Travel Writing 26 October – 11 December

This course will introduce you to the skills and concepts needed to turn your travel experiences into travel features as published in many UK newspapers and magazines, with the focus on practical writing exercises and discussion of your own work. It takes place over seven weeks online and costs £235.

[www.ice.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ice.cam.ac.uk)

### Writing for Children London School of Journalism

In this course your tutor will guide and encourage you as you work in your chosen genre. You'll learn how to construct a story that children will enjoy reading and how to create believable characters and realistic dialogue. You can either follow the course lessons or work on your own novel. The course consists of 10 lessons that should take nine to 12 months to complete, and costs £325.

[www.lsj.org](http://www.lsj.org)

# Writers' FORUM FLASH COMP RESULTS



Last month's task was to write a 500-word story given the first line

What separated this month's shortlisted stories from those that didn't make the cut? Dialogue was a notable difference.

The opening line I gave meant that many entrants opted for a story about someone looking back on their lives with fondness or regret. The common pitfall here was that stories became blocks of information, telling the reader about the characters and their lives and what the reader was supposed to think about them. The writer didn't use scenes to give the reader a glimpse into the character's life. They didn't trust the reader to create the story from scant details but handed it to them on a plate.

Having your characters talk to one another is a simple way of making sure that a scene is playing out, just as in a film or play. It's not the only way, of course, and in fact a few entries used a lot of speech but didn't really use it to any great effect. But dialogue often works well, especially in a limited space, and if you find you haven't used it very much you should ask yourself why.

## £100 winner

**To Have One's Cake** by Paul Freeman

Naomi blew out all the candles on the cake, closed her eyes and wished she and her husband Ted could be younger again. It was no fun being an overweight, middle-aged couple; doubly so when you got breathless walking up a single flight of stairs.

'Are you all right, dear?' asked Ted, preparing to cut into the chocolate gâteau.

Struggling for breath, with pains shooting down her left arm, Naomi collapsed in front of her entire family.

'Naomi!' Ted cried out.

'Mum!' cried Gillian and Bob.

'Nan?' said the grandchildren.

One evening, a few months after her sudden heart attack, Naomi accompanied her corpulent husband on a two-kilometre walk. Ted's face was scarlet by the end of it, the air rasping in and out of his lungs.

'Broccoli and boiled fish for dinner tonight,' Naomi reminded Ted, just in case he was having second thoughts over the fitness drive.

Once he had showered, Ted came down to the kitchen. Despite his aches and pains, he sliced up the broccoli.

'I'd rather have a burger,' he grumbled.

Naomi tutted in pretend disapproval.

The journey back to fitness was laborious. Week by week the weight gradually dropped off and the imagined groans of the bathroom scales became less audible. Under a strict regime of diet and exercise, Ted transformed back into the man Naomi married all those years ago.

'Look at me now!' said Ted, standing sideways in front of the bedroom mirror and viewing his trimmed down waistline.

Naomi laughed. 'I have to admit, I'm impressed.'

In shorts and T-shirt, no longer embarrassed to be seen exercising during daylight hours, Ted set off on his morning

jog with Naomi at his side. His brow glistened with a healthy perspiration and his limbs moved with the ease of an athlete.

'Keep up with me,' Naomi teased, beaming with pride and admiration.

More months slipped by, and the anniversary of Naomi's 'nasty turn', as Ted put it, approached.

At the supermarket Naomi suggested her husband avoid the super-sized chocolate gâteau, something she never would have done a year ago, and opt for a smaller, lower-calorie alternative.

'Diet option it shall be,' said Ted, placing a cake base topped with a thin layer of sugar-free icing in the trolley.

Naomi's good mood was only tempered by the attention Ted's svelte appearance was garnering from middle-aged women shoppers.

'He's mine, ladies,' Naomi whispered under her breath.

That evening the family gathered in sombre mood around the low-calorie birthday cake.

'To Naomi,' said Ted, uncorking a bottle of sparkling wine. 'A wonderful wife.'

'To Mum,' said Gillian and Bob.

'To Nan,' said the grandchildren.

Naomi recollected her birthday wish of a year ago, that she and Ted could be younger again. She gazed proudly at her husband. He looked rejuvenated, so at least half of her wish had come true.

'Only a small piece,' she reminded Ted, as he blew out the candles and cut the cake.

It was time for Naomi to leave.

• Paul, from Abu Dhabi, writes: 'I was inspired by the urge to mislead the reader and to write a story that begged to be re-read.'

## Editor's comments

The story uses an old device (one that's often banned in fiction mags) but it does so confidently and without labouring the point. A more obvious reveal at the end would have ruined it. The story is neatly put together: everything is seen from Naomi's point of view; repetition is used well for minor characters; and it ends as it begins, with a cake. Ted's weight loss, although uneventful, is shown briskly in a series of scenes. And then, as Paul wanted, you have to re-read it in a new light. That shift in perspective has more power because Paul has kept things disarmingly simple and made the reader do the work.

## Runner-up

**I, Candy** by Zoe Hunt

Candy blew out the candles on the cake, closed her eyes and wished she had fired her personal assistant before it had come to this. Although Anna had come with glowing references – she was a whizz at handling hectic celebrity work schedules – Candy suspected she was behind this birthday surprise. And if there was one thing she loathed, it was surprises.

Opening her eyes to the adoring whoops of the bookshop staff, Candy quickly spotted Anna and was about to scream, 'You're



sacked!' but stopped herself. Any public outburst would spoil the image she had worked so tirelessly to create: loyal wife to a premier league footballer; the sugary-sweet star of her own reality TV show and now, to add to her list of accomplishments, author of *I, Candy*.

Today her autobiography was going on sale. Soon the bookshop would open, her fans would spill in, snatch up copies, and she would sign and pout her way through an irksome hour, before heading off for a champagne lunch with girlfriends. 'You need to stop sacking your staff!' the girls would no doubt hoot, once she had recounted her morning. The previous casualty, Dan, was the ghost-writer behind *I, Candy*. Who did he think he was, asking all those personal questions?

'I'll write my own autobiography, dumb ass, so in-your-face!' had been her parting shot.

Fortunately, Anna had come along soon after and had helped her finish the book. Now she, too, was in the firing line.

The doors to the bookshop sprang open. It was only when the first fan bounded forwards, book in hand, that Candy realised she was still sharing her table with a birthday cake. She flashed Anna a 'Get it out of my sight' look, but Anna was focused on the queue, which now trailed out of the shop.

Candy gritted her Hollywood teeth. Her fans bored her:

'Oh my God, I just love your show.'

'Oh my God, I just love your hair.'

She couldn't even be bothered to make eye contact with them now, keeping her enhanced lashes lowered upon the books being thrust under her equally upgraded nose, ready for a signature. Then a strangely mature male voice broke the tedium.

'Oh my God, I just hate the way you treat people,' it said – mockingly, yet mannered.

Candy's eyes flicked up, already fixed into a glare. They were met, not by the speaker's own eyes, as she had expected, but by her birthday cake being thrust, with some force, square into her face.

Smearing away the creamy lumps from her eyelids, her cake-launcher swam into focus: it was Dan, her ghost-writer. Her parting words to him – *in-your-face!* – now rang hauntingly in her ears. And by Dan's side, smiling broadly, was Anna.

'You're sacked!' screamed Candy, spitting sponge from her lips. But she needn't have gone to the trouble: Anna and Dan were already heading out of the bookshop, arm in arm, with Anna whispering into Dan's ear: 'I planned the perfect birthday surprise.'

• Zoe writes: 'I liked the idea of a double birthday surprise. I wanted the cake to reappear and throwing it seemed the obvious solution, around which I developed a fun story involving revenge.'

### Editor's comments

*This is a light but satisfying story. It doesn't try anything too complicated in the short word count, but all the elements are set up for the denouement – the players, the motive and the means. It scored bonus points for using the cake so prominently! Entries to the flash comp don't have to be targeted at writers, and I wouldn't encourage it in case there's a flood, but it didn't hurt to write a story about a celebrity writer getting their comeuppance. It's a shame Dan the ghost writer doesn't say the 'In your face!' punchline.*

### Highly commended

*Food for Thought* by Ros Woolner

*Honey* by Helen Somers

*Thank You for the Days* by Peter Gaskell

*Time to Go* by Arnold Ingham

*The Wish* by Sue Moules

# Writers' FORUM FLASH COMP

## Enter our monthly quick writing contest with a £100 first prize

Our monthly competition for short short writing has a £100 prize for one winner and a number of runners-up may also be published, depending upon the nature of the contest and available space.

The flash competition is **FREE FOR SUBSCRIBERS** (single entry only). For non-subscribers (or extra subscriber entries) the entry fee is £5, which you can purchase by following the link on the *Writers' Forum* website ([www.writers-forum.com](http://www.writers-forum.com)). Entry is strictly by email only.

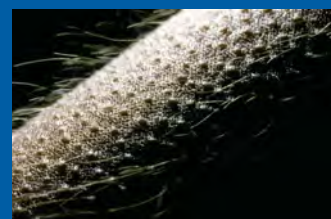
*Writers' Forum* wants to encourage you to write, so:

- We will have a theme/task each time so that new writing has to be produced.
- There will be a tight deadline so that results can be published quickly and entrants can't dither!

The judge's decision is final and no correspondence over results will be entered into. By entering, entrants agree to these rules and for their entries to be published in *Writers' Forum*.

### COMP 14: Ghost

**Deadline: 12 noon  
GMT on Monday  
5 October 2015**



### Editor's assignment:

Write a **ghost story** for Halloween. Give it a modern setting and try to come up with an idea that will leave the reader with goosebumps. You have **up to 800 words**.

### How to enter

- 1 Paste your entry into the body of a new email followed by the word count, your name and postal address. State if you're a subscriber to check against our database, or give your entry purchase order number. Add a brief couple of lines about what inspired you.
- 2 In the email's subject line box, write **Flash Comp 14:** followed by your interesting and relevant story title.
- 3 Then send your email to [flashcomp@writers-forum.com](mailto:flashcomp@writers-forum.com) by the deadline above.

The results will be published next issue!

# Research secrets



Anita Loughrey interviews Kat Gordon about the medical and other research she did for her debut novel *The Artificial Anatomy of Parks*

**T**he *Artificial Anatomy of Parks*, published by Legend Press, is my first novel. It's a coming-of-age narrative about a family with a lot of secrets, and a tentative reconciliation between a father and daughter. There are two interweaving narratives – the past and the present – interspersed with five medical facts, one for each of the five sections of the novel (Heart, Skin, Bones, Blood, and Heart Again).

I was a researcher for a company that produced studies on pensions, maternity leave, holiday allowances and similar subjects. For the most part I wasn't writing up the studies, I was collating all the information (calling people up and asking them questions). It definitely helped me learn how to organise my findings, but otherwise I approached the research for my novel in a completely different way.

With the studies, an argument couldn't be formed until we had all the data; with my novel, I started off with a character and her story, so the research was really only carried out to back it up and ensure it made sense, rather than the other way around.

I researched heart attacks, how the heart works, how a mother's body responds to the foetus inside her, the difference between 'clinical' and permanent death; the function of the skin; scar tissue; the sense of touch; fractures; the different elements of a bone; the development of the human skeleton; how much blood the body needs to survive; blood types; strokes; miscarriages; the respiratory process. These



were all either events that happened within the story, or used as metaphors for my protagonist Tallie's emotions.

For instance, in the second section of the book (Skin), Tallie has lost her mother in a hit-and-run accident and been shipped off to boarding school by her father. I wanted the medical facts to reflect how she feels but can't communicate. At that point she's trying to recover from her trauma so I wrote about scar tissue, and how skin will heal after an injury but will never be as strong.

I used to be a gymnastics coach, and had studied a little bit of anatomy for the exams, but that was years ago, and I had to start out on Wikipedia to refresh my memory. It's a bit dangerous, because it's so easy to keep clicking through to related articles, and before you know it you have thousands of words and loads of facts you want to include, but you also want the book to wear its research lightly. Since Tallie wants to be a nurse she has a legitimate interest in the

*I thought I knew Gray's Inn pretty well*

subject, so I was able to sneak some of it into conversations she has with other characters.

I'm lucky to have three friends in the medical profession, two nurses and one doctor, who could read through the 'facts' and answer questions. Tallie's father starts the novel in an induced coma after a heart attack, and my friend who works in cardiac care was able to tell me how long he'd be under for.

I suppose I felt my way into the research in a fairly disorganised, 'organic' fashion, fact-checking as I went. For example, I'd read about boarding schools but checked my opinions against reality with friends who'd attended boarding schools. They could

fill in specific details that add authenticity – how many beds to a dorm, or the sanctions used for various offences.

One of the major bits of research was what would happen at school if you were infectious. I imagined myself in Tallie's place, then read through all my notes and chose the things she would pick up on, underlining as I went.

When it came to the five 'facts', the trick was deciding just how 'medical' to make them. It was surprising how metaphorical the body can be when discussed in purely scientific terms.

For instance, at a certain stage in the novel I wanted to hint that Tallie has got stronger the older and more experienced she is, and that tied in perfectly to the fact that when we're born we have over 270 bones, but as we grow some of them fuse together and become stronger.

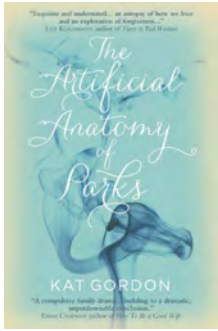
In the end, I had to change the language a little, but I'd always check with my friends in medicine that the meaning was the same.

## Other research

I researched so much! I researched jam recipes, how the interior of a piano works (neither of those details made it into the final draft), what song was No 1 in the summer of 2002, what time of day *Murder, She Wrote* would be shown on TV in 1994 (those details did make it into the final draft).

I used a website called London-Weather.eu to find out about the weather in August 1991. The site was incredibly detailed, giving the mean, highest and lowest temperatures, total rainfall,





total sun, and a paragraph describing the month overall, and any anomalies or big weather events.

I'm from London, so it made sense for most of the book to be set there, and I managed to incorporate many of the areas I've spent a lot of time in over the years. The house that Tallie grows up in is very similar to an ex-boyfriend's house in Battersea, near the park. Later on, when she's estranged from her family, she's living in north London (which is where I'm from), and it's less well-turned out but very lively, and I think that suited her sense of self and lifestyle. I based Tallie's flat on a studio flat a friend once rented.

My mum used to work around Gray's Inn, so I thought I knew it pretty well, but when I started describing it, I realised I only had a vague idea. For example, I knew there was a small side gate close to Red Lion Street, but knew none of the real details – the colour of the building on your right as you enter that gate, or the fact that it has a cast-iron balcony along the first floor. I went for

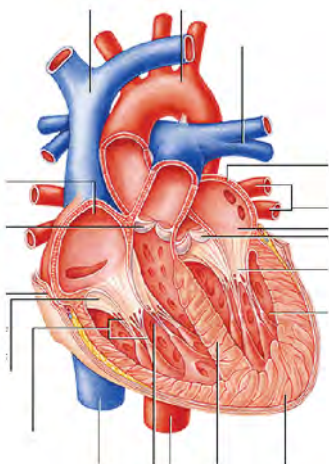
a walk around the Inn and the surrounding area, and took some photos that I referred back to for that scene.

When I started writing the book, one of my friends was working at the London Heart Hospital in Marylebone (which has now moved to Barts in the Spitalfields area), so I went to visit her on her lunch break and had a quick look around. I took the same bus that Tallie does in the story so that I'd know her exact route, and anything I didn't notice on that journey I double-checked by going over the route on Google Street View. I could have done the whole thing online, but sometimes it's nice to get out of the house!

It sounds obvious, but always write down page numbers, and book editions, and write down URLs you've used for research too: I've learned the hard way that computers aren't infallible, so bookmarking pages online isn't always enough.

I really enjoyed all the research I did for this book. I actually enjoyed it so much I decided to write about a group of real people for my second novel, which means I have to do a lot of research at the moment, going to the British Library every day and reading letters, newspapers, diaries, etc. I think there's something very satisfying about blending non-fiction with fiction, and I like feeling that I've learned something when I finish a book, whether writing or reading one.

• Find out more about Kat Gordon on Twitter @katgordon1984. She also has an author profile on Goodreads



## WRITING OUTLETS

with Janet Cameron

### Stories for Halloween

#### Short Scary Stories

[www.reddit.com/r/shortscarystories](http://www.reddit.com/r/shortscarystories)



Short Scary Stories want you to terrify the life out of their readers with creepy or thrilling stories. You could even be chosen as Writer of the Month.

**Tip:** They say: 'Stories gain extra pace and tension by using short sentences for the main events.'

**Submissions:** Register then click the link to submit a story of up to 500 words. All stories must be standalone. Poor quality or unoriginal stories are removed. Please avoid violent crime, addiction, depression or bereavement – the stories here are for fun. Mark adult content 'NSFW'. One story per post, no additional stories within 24 hours.

#### Gods-and-Monsters.com

[gods-and-monsters.com](http://gods-and-monsters.com)



A great site for myth and monster stories, with a true scary story section and a fiction section, as well as pages of facts.

**Tip:** 'Myths on their own are powerless until we bring them into our own experience, test them against our own fears, and face them in our own lives,' says the editor.

**Submissions:** For the true scary story section, the story must have happened to you or someone you know. For the fiction scary story section, send stories about the supernatural, mythology, monsters, creatures, unexplained events, UFOs, etc. There are clear links for submitting your story. They ask for a minimum of just 1000 characters.

#### Your Ghost Stories

[yourghoststories.com](http://yourghoststories.com)



This site is dedicated to readers' own paranormal experiences. These may be events that are strange and disturbing and that defy explanation. It's an outlet for speculation. What really happened and why? So if you believe you have experienced ghosts, spirits or hauntings, submit your story to this attractive, easy-to-negotiate website. Your Ghost Stories also appreciates comments on stories posted by other writers.

**Tip:** The site welcomes everyone, particularly mediums, ghost hunters and those who have psychic abilities.

**Submissions:** Register with a username and password and click on the submission link.

• Janet's ebook *Fifteen Women Philosophers*, published by [decodedscience.com](http://decodedscience.com), is available from Amazon

# Competitive Edge

## Chock full of chickens

**Alex McCall, a young winner of the Kelpies Prize, explains how his success in the competition led to a career in writing for children**

Alex won the Kelpies Prize in 2013 with his book *Attack of the Giant Robot Chickens*, and is still only 21. 'I think it was the humour in it that made it a winner,' he says. 'It is just chock full of chicken jokes and everyone likes chicken jokes so it appeals to a wide variety of people. And giant robot chickens are just cool. I think it's also because my book was more what the judges were looking for. One of my competitors had a book that seemed aimed at an older age group. My book is for ages 8-12, though it's suitable for kids a bit older and a bit younger. I wrote it like that because that's what the Kelpies Prize asked for. Up until then everything I'd written had been aimed at teenagers, because I was a teenager and I wrote stuff I'd want to read. So *Attack of the Giant Robot Chickens* was something very new for me.'

'The main difference I found writing children was that I couldn't just kill off characters if I ran into plot difficulties. I had to put a lot more thought into it and the book turned out better for that. Apart from keeping your main characters alive and reasonably healthy there's nothing special about children's writing. Like any other genre you just need a good solid story to sell it.'

'Winning the Kelpies Prize was great, but getting Floris as my publisher was more than I could have hoped for. They helped me get in touch with schools so I could do visits and advised me on just about everything.'

Since his win, life has got very busy for Alex. So, how does he fit everything in?

'With great difficulty! I'm not very organised. Google Calendar is my life saver. It allows me to keep mostly on track of everything that I have to do. The rest of it is just remembering when to eat.'

Alex also has some tips for those who might want to tackle a competition

involving writing for children.

'Don't try to write a children's book,' he says, 'just write a good story. If you're focusing more on writing something that's technically correct and what you think the kids are into, then there's a good chance that the story itself will suffer. Above all have fun with it. If you enjoy writing it they'll enjoy reading it.'

The Kelpies Prize is open for entries now, and you can find out more on their website, [www.florisbooks.co.uk](http://www.florisbooks.co.uk). If writing for children's your thing, or even if you've never tried it before, why not have a go?

### **Helen's Hint** Children's books

Alex is obviously a natural when it comes to writing for children, but I wondered what other tips might be helpful for people who are coming to it fresh. So, I asked some children's writers to share their hints with me.

Tamsyn Murray, author of the *Completely Cassidy* series, says: 'Start your story with action. There may be vital information about your character's past that you want the reader to know, but the opening pages are not the place to dump it.'

Dialogue is also important, Tamsyn says. 'Learn the difference between direct and indirect speech. Dialogue usually speeds your story up but not if it's an unnecessary conversation that could have been covered by one sentence.'

Thea Bennett, who writes for both adults and children, says: 'Aim for three equal parts of action, inner reflection and dialogue. Not too much of any of these – keep moving between them. Don't have too much description; give it through the dialogue and inner stuff.'

Sue Bentley, who wrote the *Magic Kitten*, *Puppy* and *Pony* books, advises: 'I think what applies to writing for adults applies for children too. Make them laugh, make



them cry – or maybe feel sad briefly! – and remember those end-of-chapter hooks to keep them guessing.'

Finally, Julie Day advises: 'Read what is out there now, in all age ranges.'

### **Competition of the Month**

This month, I've chosen the Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize. The first prize is €10,000, which is definitely worth aiming for, and there are three additional prizes of €1000. The judge, Billy Collins, is a two-time US Poet Laureate, so it would be well worth catching his eye.

Rebecca O'Connor, editor of *The Moth* magazine, who runs the competition, told me: 'This prize is open to anyone, regardless of their publishing history or where in the world they are, and is judged blind. And, unlike most other prizes for a single poem, there is no line limit.'

The closing date is 31 December, and you can find out more on *The Moth* website at [www.themothmagazine.com](http://www.themothmagazine.com). Best of luck if you decide to give this one a go.

Don't forget we're always keen to hear your recommendations for 'Competition of the Month'. Do get in touch at the email address above.





with short story writer  
**Helen M Walters**

## COMPS NOW OPEN

### Henshaw Press Short Story Competition Closes 12 Jan 2016

**Story:** 2000 words. **Fee:** £5.  
**Prizes:** £100; £50; £25. **Details:** see [henshawpress.co.uk](http://henshawpress.co.uk) or write to The Henshaw Competition, 24 Rowlandson Close, Northampton NN3 3PB.h

### Purbeck Literary Festival Short Story Competition Closes 14 Jan 2016

**Story:** 1000 words. **Theme:** 'Heroes'. **Fee:** £3.50. **Prize:** £100 and publication in *Writers' Forum*, a hand-bound notebook, plus an invite to the festival to receive prize from author Jill Mansell, with a night's hotel accommodation. **Judge:** Della Galton. **Details:** see [www.purbeckliteraryfestival.info](http://www.purbeckliteraryfestival.info)

### Fish Publishing Short Memoir Competition Closes 31 Jan 2016

**Memoir:** 4000 words. **Fee:** online €16 (€10 for subsequent entries); postal €18 (€12). **Prizes:** €1000; Fish online writing course. **Judge:** Jan Morris. **Details:** see [www.fish-publishing.com/memoir-competition-contest.php](http://www.fish-publishing.com/memoir-competition-contest.php) or write to Fish Short Memoir Prize, Durrus, Bantry, Co Cork, Ireland.

### Kent and Sussex Poetry Society Open Competition Closes 31 Jan 2016

**Poem:** 40 lines. **Fee:** £5 per poem, or £4 each for three or more. **Prizes:** £1000; £300; £100; 4 x £50. **Judge:** Anne-Marie Fyfe. **Details:** see [kentandsussexpoetry.com](http://kentandsussexpoetry.com) or write to The Competition Organiser, 13 Ruscombe Close, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN4 0SG.

## COMPS CLOSING SOON

31 OCT

### Cannon Poets Sonnet or Not 2015

**Poem:** 14 lines. **Fee:** £4 for first



Purbeck Literary Festival  
launches its story comp

poem, then £2.50 each. **Prizes:** £400; £200; £100. **Judge:** Adrian Blackledge. **Details:** [www.cannon-poets.org.uk](http://www.cannon-poets.org.uk) or write to Cannon Poets, 22 Margaret Grove, Harborne, Birmingham B17 9JH.

### Flash 500 Novel Contest

**Novel:** first chapter and synopsis. **Fee:** £10. **Prizes:** £500; £200. **Judges:** Crooked Cat Publishing. **Details:** see [flash500.com](http://flash500.com)

### Earlyworks Press

#### Short Story Competition

**Story:** 8000 words maximum. **Fee:** £5 up to 4000 words; £10 if over. **Prize:** £100. **Details:** please see [www.earlyworkspress.co.uk](http://www.earlyworkspress.co.uk) or write to Earlyworks Press, Creative Media Centre, 45 Robertson Street, Hastings, E Sussex TN34 1HL.

### Exeter Novel Prize

**Novel:** opening and synopsis, not more than 10,000 words. **Fee:** £15. **Prizes:** £500 and trophy; 5 x £75 and trophy. **Judge:** Broo Doherty of DHH Agency. **Details:** see [www.creativewritingmatters.co.uk/2015-exeter-novel-prize.html](http://www.creativewritingmatters.co.uk/2015-exeter-novel-prize.html)

I NOV

### Caledonia Novel Award

**Novel:** first 20 pages and 200-word synopsis. **Rules:** unpublished debut novel for adults or YA. **Fee:** £20. **Prize:** £1000 and trophy. **Judge:** Kathryn Ross of Fraser Ross

Continued overleaf ►



## KELPIESPRIZE2016

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## THEPOETRYSOCIETY

Presents

## National Poetry Competition



**Judges:** Sarah Howe  
Esther Morgan  
David Wheatley  
**Deadline:** 31 October 2015

**First prize:** £5000  
**Second prize:** £2000  
**Third prize:** £1000  
**Commendations:** £200

It's easy to enter online at [www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc)  
or call us on 020 7420 9880 for more information



## Unpublished Young-Adult Novel Prize

Winning novel published by Fish  
Enter: 1st ch. or 1st 5,000 words  
Judge: Louise O'Neill  
Closes: 31 October '15  
Entry fee: €20

## 2015 Short Story Prize

Prizes: 1st - €3,000. 2nd - wk at *Anam Cara Writers Retreat* + €300.  
3rd - €300  
Judge: Kevin Barry  
Closes: 30 November '15  
Entry: €20, €10 subsequent

- Details Online -

To Enter

Online:

[www.fishpublishing.com](http://www.fishpublishing.com)

Post:

Fish Publishing, Durrus,  
Bantry, Co Cork, Ireland

Also online

Writing Courses  
Critique and Editorial Services

Continued from page 63

Associates. **Details:** please see [www.caledonianovelaward.com](http://www.caledonianovelaward.com)

### Scribble Annual Short Story Competition 2015

**Story:** 3000 words. **Theme:** first line: *The white envelope fluttered down to the carpet...* **Fee:** £4. **Prizes:** £100; £50; £25. **Details:** see [www.parkpublications.co.uk](http://www.parkpublications.co.uk) or write to 14 The Park, Stow on the Wold, Cheltenham GL54 1DX.

30 NOV

### Plough Prize

**Poem:** 40 lines. **Fee:** £5. **Prizes:** £1000; £500; £250. **Judge:** Carol Ann Duffy. **Details:** see [www.theploughprize.co.uk](http://www.theploughprize.co.uk) or write to The Plough Prize, The Plough Arts Centre, 9-11 Fore Street, Torrington, Devon EX38 8HQ.

### Cinnamon Press Debut Poetry Collection Prize

**Poems:** 10 of up to 40 lines each. **Fee:** £12 (£10 subsequent entries). **Prize:** £500 plus publishing contract. **Details:** see [www.cinnamonpress.com/competitions/debut-poetry-collection-prize](http://www.cinnamonpress.com/competitions/debut-poetry-collection-prize) or write to Meirion House, Tanygrisiau, Blaenau Ffestiniog LL41 3SU.

### HE Bates Short Story Competition

**Story:** 2000 words. **Fee:** £6 or two for £10. **Prizes:** £500; £100; £50; £50 best story by local writer. **Judge:** Morgen Bailey. **Details:** see [www.hebatescompetition.org.uk](http://www.hebatescompetition.org.uk) or write to HE Bates Competition, 19 Kingswell Road, Kingsthorpe, Northampton NN2 6QB.

### Aeon Award

**Story:** 10,000 words. **Theme:** science fiction, fantasy or horror. **Fee:** €7.50. **Prizes:** €1000; €200; €100. **Details:** see [www.albedo1.com/aeon-award](http://www.albedo1.com/aeon-award).

### Fish Publishing Short Story Prize

**Story:** 5000. **Fee:** online €20 (subsequent entries €10); postal €22 (€12). **Prizes:** €3000 (€1000 of which is for travel expenses to the anthology launch); a week at the Anam Cara Writers' & Artists' Retreat and €300 travel expenses;

€300. **Details:** see [www.fishpublishing.com/contest-short-story.php](http://www.fishpublishing.com/contest-short-story.php) or write to Fish Short Story Prize, Durrus, Bantry, Co Cork, Ireland.

1 DEC

### Earlyworks Press Web Poetry Competition

**Poem:** 40 lines. **Fee:** £3 per poem, £15 for up to six entries. **Prizes:** £100; £25; £5 for any published on website. **Details:** see [www.earlyworkspress.co.uk/Competition\\_poetry\\_details.htm](http://www.earlyworkspress.co.uk/Competition_poetry_details.htm) or write to Earlyworks Press, Creative Media Centre, 45 Robertson Street, Hastings, E Sussex TN34 1HL.

18 DEC

### The Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition

**Novel for children:** full manuscript, synopsis and chapter breakdown. **Fee:** £15. **Prize:** publishing contract with Chicken House and advance of £10,000. **Rules:** suitable for children somewhere between 7 and 18 years. **Details:** see [doublecluck.com/submissions](http://doublecluck.com/submissions) or write to Chicken House, 2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

31 DEC

### Ballymaloe Poetry Prize

**Poem:** no line limit. **Fee:** €12. **Prizes:** €10,000; 3 x €1000. **Judge:** Billy Collins. **Details:** see [www.themothmagazine.com](http://www.themothmagazine.com) or write to The Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize, c/o The Moth, Ardan Grange, Milltown, Belturbet, Co Cavan, Ireland.

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Theme and genre are open. Entries should be original and unpublished. Postal entries should be printed on white A4 in a clear plain font. Include a separate cover sheet with the title, word count, your name, address and postcode, phone and email. Stories should be double-spaced with good margins. Where necessary include a large enough sae with sufficient postage. Always contact the organiser or check their website to confirm details. Writers' Forum does not accept responsibility for errors in or changes to the information listed.

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# Where I write

Phil Barrington talks to science fiction, dark fantasy and young adult author Kim Lakin-Smith

I was born in the dining room of Ivy House and grew up here, part of a big family of biological and foster siblings and an even bigger zoo of rescued animals my mother took a liking to. As a grown up, I live with my husband Del and 12-year-old daughter Scarlet in the downstairs part of the house and my 83-year-old father lives upstairs. My workroom is the conservatory. I have only a pane of glass separating me from the elements.

My latest children's book, *A Very Dark Enchantment*, is set in a fantasy version of the house, and was influenced by how it felt to grow up with its nooks and crannies and potential for fairies down the garden. The book is full of references to it – the silver cupboard locked by an iron lever, the drain inhabited by a large toad, the creepy cellar. A lot of the story was written as I walked the dogs in a nearby cornfield.

Six years ago, my doctor advised me to step away from the PC and find more

relaxing environments in which to write. I started to write longhand in coffee shops, the library, waiting rooms, on the beach, in the car, at the park and in the garden. I balance writing first drafts in notebooks with typing up on a laptop in the conservatory. Laborious, but it's part of the editing process, and there's something wonderful about a pile of notebooks filled with my own cramped handwriting.

I love steampunk, which is reflected in my wooden globe, green glass writing lamp and not-quite-matching Edwardian wooden desks. I like house plants and cut flowers, and have a beautiful Art Nouveau lily vase and matching art print calendar, which makes me sound terribly sophisticated. But then I have my hippy goth side, so I have aliens with tongues sticking out, glass witch balls, African drums and Day of the Dead skulls.

Behind me is a bookcase for my favourite authors and reference books on world

costume, folklore and mythology, motor mechanics and theatre. I have prints by hot-rod artist Ian Guy and Gothic surreal painter Jasmine Becket-Griffith ('Strangeling'). Ian's work was a huge influence on *Autodrome*, my novel about a futuristic city where teens take part in a steampunk death race. Jasmine's work reminds me to strive for the darkly fantastical hues of some of my favourite stories – *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Faraway Tree*.

My daughter is home-schooled, so the conservatory also serves as a classroom. It's also the run-through for a fat Labrador, a manic spaniel and two bloodthirsty cats. In the summer, wasps assault me. In the winter, I shiver next to a tiny oil heater. The sofa behind my desk acts as an invitation for anyone to sit and tell me about their day, no matter how tight my deadlines or how deeply immersed I may be in worlds of mutation, subterfuge or murder.

I still dream of my own attic with a round window looking out over hillsides covered in woodland. In reality though, I want to experience life first hand and not just write about it.



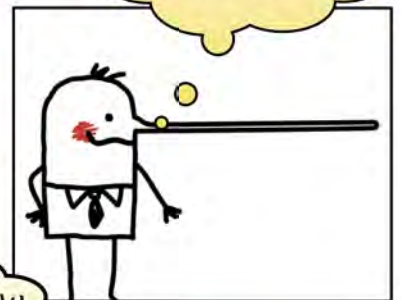
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much?!



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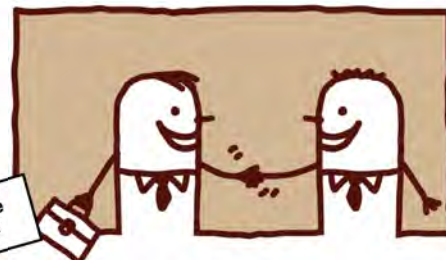
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**"The material is very informative and interesting as well as covering pretty much everything you would need to know when starting to proofread. There are a lot of tips and ideas for freelancers in general that you can see have been tried and tested and are being passed on in good faith."**

**"Overall, I found the information in this course very useful. It covered all the main areas that anyone interested in working as a proofreader/copy editor would need to know."**

**Shazia Fardous,**  
Freelance Proofreader and Copyeditor

**"This is an extremely helpful course both for those starting proofreading and for those who, like me, need to be reminded of everything we have forgotten. Above all, I thoroughly enjoyed the tone of voice of the author – he writes with authority but manages to keep a light touch."**

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